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SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE

Signale – Ein Weltraumabenteuer

DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme (GDR 1970)
Artistic Working Group "Roter Kreis" [Red Circle] in Orwocolor and 70mm
Co-produced by Przedsiębiorstwo Realizacji Filmów Based on the novel *Asteroidenjäger* by Carlos Rasch

Directed by GOTTFRIED KOLDITZ

Screenplay: Claus-Ulrich Wiesner, Gottfried Kolditz. *Dramaturgy:* Thea Richter. *Dialogues Polish version:* Grażyna Dyksińska. *Assistant Directors:* Gerda Eggers-Ebert, Maria Starzeńska. *Director of Photography:* Otto Hanisch. *Camera Assistants:* Detlef Hertelt, Kurt Schulze. *Special Photography and Model Shots:* Kurt Marks, Otto Hanisch. *Spacecraft Models built by:* PGH HAWEGE Schönbrunn Ulrich Meyer. *Model Movement Equipment:* Jan-Peter Schmarje. *Animation:* Stanisław Dülz. *Still Photographers:* Manfred Damm, Heinz Welzel. *Art Directors:* Erich Krüllke, Werner Pieske, Jochen (Joachim) Keller, Roman Wołyniec. *Set Construction:* Günter Kriewitz, Bruno Möller, Eberhard Pietrek. *Electronic Equipment:* Wilfried Riemer. *Props:* Adolf Kilian, Erich Dombrowsky. *Costume Design:* Günther Schmidt (Schmidt-Heidemann), Marianne Schmidt. *Make-up Artists:* Kurt Tauchmann, Christa Grewald, Mirosław Jakubowski. *Sound:* Georg Gutschmidt, Klaus Wolter. Jerzy Blaszyński. *Editor:* Helga Gentz. *Music and Electronic Sound Design:* Karl-Ernst Sasse. *Music Consultant:* Addy Kurth. *Production Managers:* Dorothea Hildebrandt (GDR), Marceli Nowak (Poland). *Location Managers:* Gerrit List (GDR), Lechosław Szuttenbach, Henryk Strzebiecki (Poland). *Scientific Consultants:* Heinz Mielke, Olgierd Wołczek.

Cast:

Pior Pawłowski (Veikko, commander of spaceship "Laika"), Yevgeny Sharikov (Pavel), Gojko Mitić (Terry), Alfred Müller (Konrad), Helmut Schreiber (Gaston), Irena Karel (Juana), Soheir Morshedy (Samira), Iurie Darie (Commander), Karin Ugowski (Krystina), Zbigniew Sawan (Director of space station "Luna-North"), Friedrich Richter (Director of the Space Security Center), Aubrey W. Pankey (Older scientist), Marianne Christina Schilling (Chief coordinator), Jean Hounsinou (Navigator "Luna-North"), Berndt Renné (Handover engineer), Fred Ludwig (Engineer at "Luna-North"), Fritz Mohr (Navigator of spaceship "Ikar os"), Ewa Szykulska (Rosi), Promod Pandey (Indian), Anh Dao Pham Huy (Mongolian), Zerempel Sancha, Marimi Takahashi, Masaru Takahashi, Touré Beubacar, Almany Gen Silly Souvave, Pinto Da Costa, Aicha Benfata, Sunil Das Gupta, Frank (D.F.) Plange (Engineering personnel), Sunil Sen Gupta, Diawara Dramané (Control personnel).

Dubbing voices German version: Eberhard Mellies (Veikko), Thomas Kästner (Pavel), Karl Sturm (Terry), Karin Schröder (Juana), Evamaria Bath (Samira), Jürgen Frohriep (Commander), Wolfgang Kieling (Older scientist).

Dubbing voices Polish version: Ignacy Machowski (Gaston), Jerzy Rogowski (Pavel), Woijiech Zeidler (Terry), Zdzisław Salaburski (Konrad), Teresa Olenderczyk (Samira).

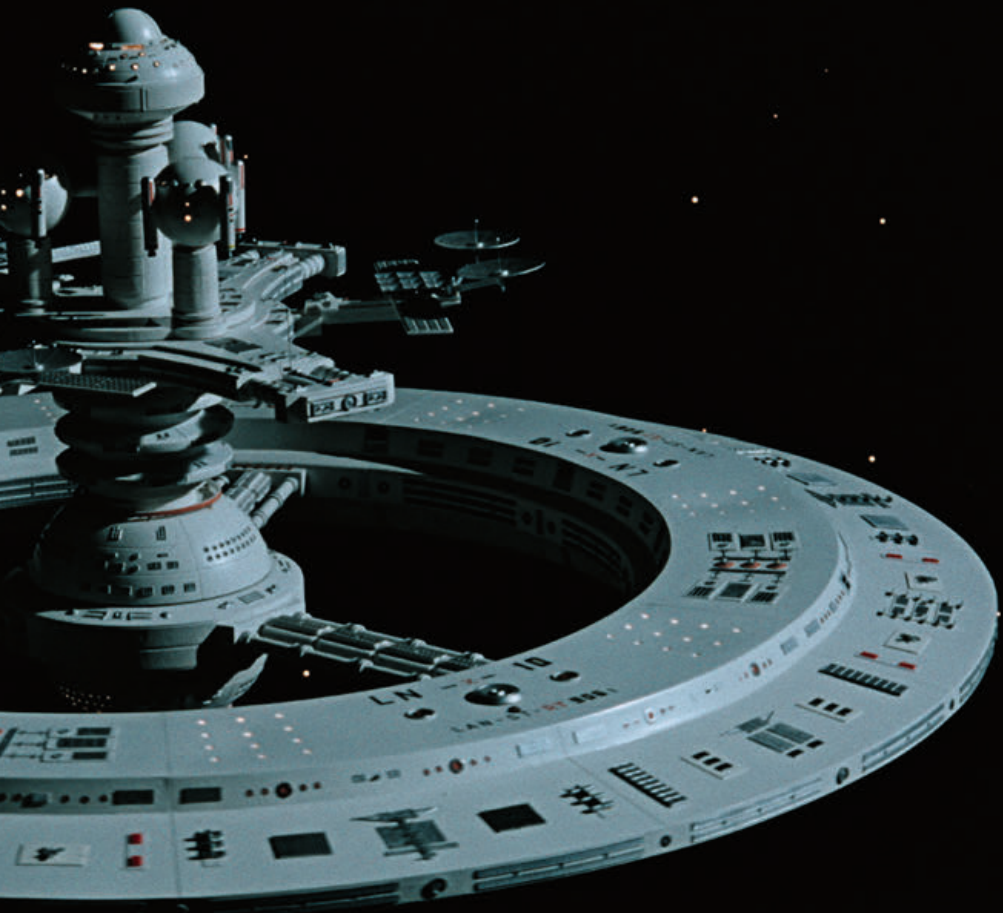
Preproduction and production: 1969-70.

Studios: Babelsberg, Łódź. *Color by:* Orwocolor. Filmfabrik Wolfen. Photographed in 70mm. *Aspect Ratio:* 2.21:1. 6 track magnetic sound. *Running time:* 91 Minuten (24 fps), 87 Minuten (25 fps). *East German distributor:* Progress Film-Vertrieb, Berlin. *East German poster designed by:* Spörl. *Premiere:* December 17, 1970, Berlin, Kosmos Cinema. *Regular release date:* 18. Dezember 1970.

Poland: May 20, 1971, Sygnały MMXX. *Soviet Union:* September 11, 1972, Сигналы - Приключения в космосе. *Hungary:* September 29, 1972, Meteorvadászok. *World Sales:* Signals: A Space Adventure.

The model shots were awarded with the Grand prix at UNIATEC 1972 (International Union of Technical Cinematograph Associations).

Credits courtesy of Rolf Giesen



SIGNALS:
A SPACE ADVENTURE

by

Rolf Giesen

A Space Odyssey in 70mm

Early 1969. Half a year before the lunar landing. "Roter Kreis" (Red Circle), a working group of the DEFA Studios in Babelsberg got the chance to screen two films: the first produced in Rome, the second in London. On January 24 they saw *Barbarella* by Roger Vadim, on February 12 a production that was celebrated as a VFX sensation, photographed in 70mm. The filmmakers from the East were interested in the commercial as well as the technical aspects. They wanted to push their studio technologically and needed a popular topic that was recognized internationally. So far, none of their productions had really entered the U.S. market – apart from one exception and that one was sci-fi. A new film project began to take shape in their imagination after they had seen the 70mm epic from Great Britain: Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. (Selected persons with special travel documents were able to cross the border and see *2001* already the year before in a West-Berlin cinema.)

A short time ago the Thorndikes, Andrew and Annelie, had convinced Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), to think big and produce films on a large scale. Ulbricht agreed with them and so the Thorndikes produced a 111-minute documentary in 70mm technique developed in the Babelsberg studios: *Du bist min – Ein deutsches Tagebuch* (*You Are Mine: A German Diary*). But that one wasn't big: only a comparison between the two German states, socialism in the East, capitalism in the West. Even no interesting soundtrack. 70mm, however, was destined for bigger projects.

In 1962, there were only two cinemas equipped for 70mm screenings, mostly of Soviet films in the GDR. (At the beginning of the 1970s this number increased tenfold.) Now, with Walter Ulbricht's approval, a special camera, film stock and projectors were developed. The system was called DEFA 70: *Term used for the single lens reflex camera with integrated sound recording for 70mm negative film or the respective 70mm process (aspect ratio: 2.21:1) developed by DEFA, Potsdam-Babelsberg, under the direction of engineer Georg Maidorn.*[1] Ulbricht was interested in the GDR becoming the technologically leading state of the Warsaw Pact, which included the moving image as well. "So the GDR, just a few years after the USSR and the USA, became the third country in the world in which the material and technical basis for 70mm technology was completely present." [2] The Federal Republic of Germany was ahead with a 1962-documentary: *Flying Clipper* (*Mediterranean Holiday*) produced by Rudolf Travnicek and his *M[odern]C[inema]S[ystems] 70* company. The 70mm equipment was constructed by Norwegian engineer Jan Wulff Jacobsen who was turned down by DEFA in the late 1950s when he offered them a Scope lens.

The East Germans thought: If you have a large film format you better get the right stories – and, as is well known, the universe is infinite. West Germany had just come up with a sci-fi TV series: *Raumpatrouille* (*Space Patrol*) that presented war in space – mankind vs. the so-called Frogs, shimmering silhouettes based on human shapes. The series was in black and white but technologically advanced thanks to Bavaria Studios' optical and model department (they had just purchased a new Oxberry Printer) and Karl-Ludwig Ruppel's blue screen. At that time, East Germany had no Oxberry Printer (sometime later they acquired a 70mm Oxberry!) and no color film stock that allowed blue screen technique. Nevertheless, they favored science fiction, too, but wanted to counter with a peaceful theme which meant: No Star Wars!

In April, 1969, DEFA head Franz Bruk expressed the desire that this subject should help to spread the Marxist world view in an entertaining way by opposing the imperialist manipulation of the world in front of a utopian background.

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[1] *70mm – Bigger than Life.* Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2009, p. 145.

[2] Arsenal-berlin.de/kino/programmarchiv/2006/filmreihe/eine-frage-des-formats-defa-70/

Last Message from Space Security Center

"Spaceship Ikaros is located near Jupiter. Will this research work bring us closer to fulfilling humanity's ancient dream of establishing contact with intelligent beings from other solar systems? A new millennium lies ahead. Earth greets you, cosmonauts."

These are the opening lines of the result of what they had seen on a West-Berlin screen: the first East-German space adventure in 70mm produced by DEFA Studios in Babelsberg, the same lot that was occupied until 1945 by the powerful UFA company. UFA had produced two costly science-fiction silents both directed by Fritz Lang: *Metropolis* that was supposed to end with the two lovers (played by Brigitte Helm and Gustav Fröhlich) going to the stars, and *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon/By Rocket to the Moon*) -- and, due to WW2, shelved another one, *Weltraumschiff 18* (*Spaceship 18*) based on a book by Hans Dominik. Instead, they had Hans Albers as *Münchhausen* go to the Moon in 1942, just by the forces of imagination, aboard a Montgolfiere. DEFA revived the tradition in 1959 with the production of *Der schweigende Stern* (*The Silent Star*). An abridged version of *The Silent Star* was even seen in U.S. cinemas released by Crown International Pictures in 1962 as *First Spaceship on Venus* and syndicated by Desilu Sales in 1964. Obviously, Gene Roddenberry had seen it while he was with Desilu. Although he later claimed the idea of an international spaceship crew came from AIP's Jules Verne adaptation *Master of the World*, his *Star Trek* concept was clearly inspired by the East German/Polish co-production directed by DEFA co-founder Dr. Kurt Maetzig and based on a novel (*Astronauci*) by Polish author Stanisław Lem, a survivor of the Holocaust. East-German audiences had to wait ten years for a follow-up. This time the producers from the German Democratic Republic insisted on a German novel as source and selected *Asteroidenjäger* (literal translation: *Asteroid Hunters*) by Carlos Rasch.

Asteroid Hunters

Carlos Rasch was born on April 6, 1932 to German parents in Curitiba, Brazil. When he was six, the family returned to Germany. Until 1944 Carlos grew up in Elbing (today Elblag in Poland). For some time, he

worked as a turner, then, in 1951, joined ADN (General German News Service) and studied at the Institute for Literature "Johannes R. Becher" in Leipzig. In addition to his journalistic work, he decided to write popular novels: "There were many crime stories, but serious space literature was rare in German-speaking territories. These novels dealt with the apocalypse, the collapse of the world and the solar system. But I believed that the future had to be presented in a positive way. I still think so today."

Rasch was 29 when his first book was published by Verlag Neues Leben: *Asteroidenjäger*. Rasch: "The first printing had 148,000 copies. Today an author can only dream of that."

In GDR, however, they didn't use the terms Hugo Gernsback had invented for his pulp magazines: *Scientifiction* (1926) or *Science Fiction* (1929). They called it *utopian novels* or simply *Zukunftsliteratur* (future-related literature):

…the German Science Fiction of the past was suspected of reactionary content, as some of its most popular writers in the Third Reich were all too willing to be harnessed to the Nazi propaganda wagon.

On the other hand, the initial phase of GDR Science Fiction – and this affected both authors as well as readers – was determined precisely by the reading experiences of the 1930s and 1940s. The literature of that time also filled the bookcases in the young GDR. The German SF of those years shaped the reception of the genre in the GDR for a long time and caused a (largely justified) prejudice against the entire SF – but at the same had a strong influence on GDR authors, who only hesitantly embraced SF. This influence was extremely heterogeneous. Authors were fascinated by the formal language of their predecessors and copied them but also wrote (usually very superficially) against the reactionary content of old German SF. [3]

[3] Erik Simon and Olaf R. Spittel (ed.), *Die Science-fiction der DDR. Autoren und Werke: Ein Lexikon.* Berlin/GDR: Verlag Das Neue Berlin, 1988, p. 13.

However, several events ultimately contributed to the popularization of science fiction in the GDR: First, there were the successes of Soviet space travel, the launch of Sputnik 1 on October 4, 1957, which triggered a real "Sputnik Shock" in the West, and the first man in space on April 11, 1961 (cosmonaut Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin in 1961); and second, the success of USSR SF novels, for instance *Tumannost Andromedy (Andromeda Nebula)* by Ivan Antonovich Yefremov. And not to forget: in GDR astronomy was a school subject from the tenth grade onwards.

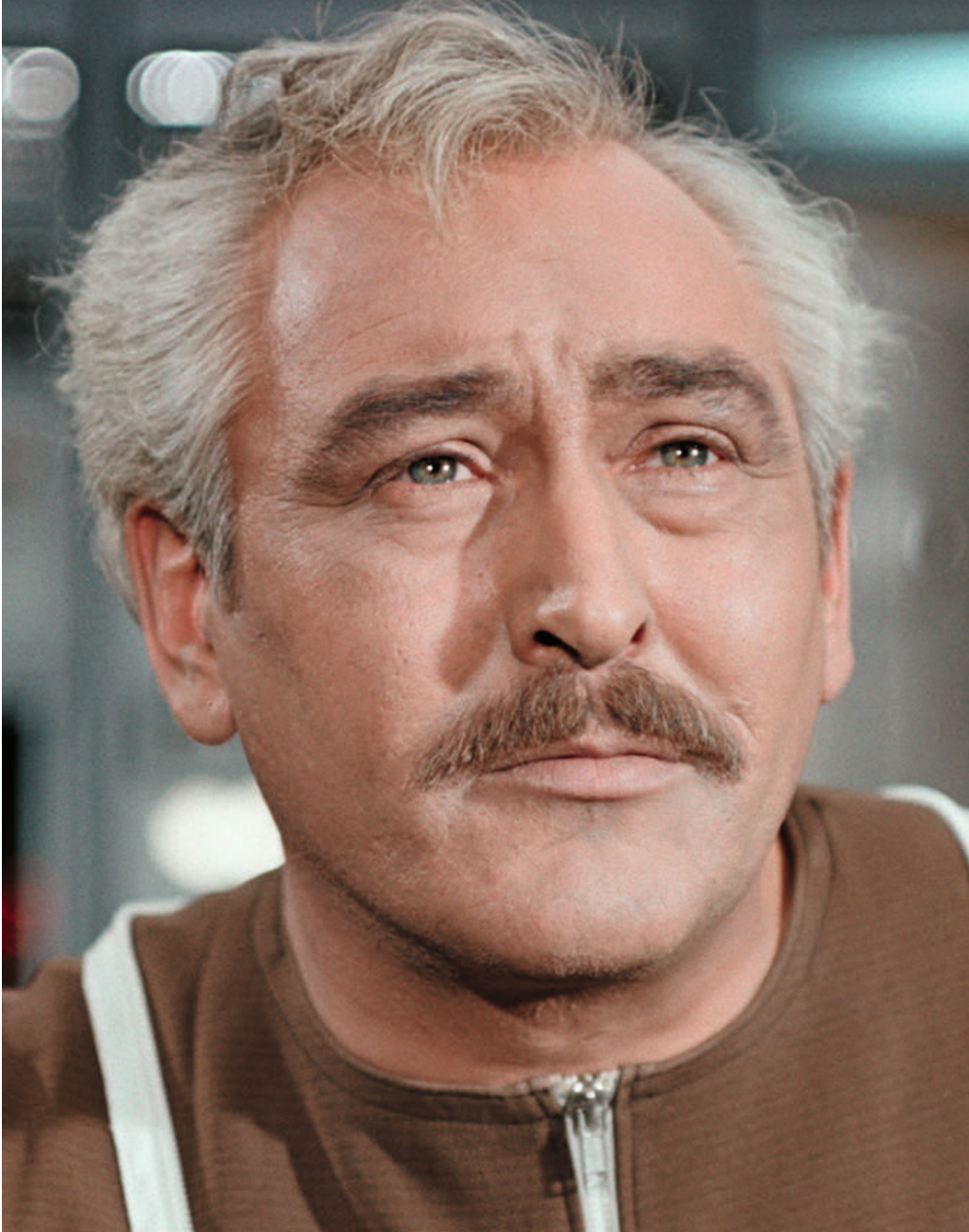
This blurb of Carlos Rasch's promised exciting reading material:

The radar blares its meteor warning through all of the rocket's cabins. The cosmonaut Sagitta, pale of terror, clings to her chair. Has her brother gone mad? Why is he shouting request after request over the radio towards the speeding meteor? Then Sagitta sees a V-shaped silhouette on the radar screen. Was that supposed to be a spaceship? They don't build V-shaped spaceships on Earth. Where does it come from? Why is it silent? And over half of the crew is outside of their own spaceship, on a planetoid!

The cosmonauts of the Asteroid Hunter AJ-408 have to overcome these and other adventurous dangers. As part of a comprehensive space air traffic control service, they search for asteroids and meteorite swarms in the debris belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter together with other spaceship flotillas on Earth in order to either destroy them or equip them with radio warning beacons. Four hundred years after the first Sputnik, meteorites are still the greatest danger to humans in space. That's why the asteroid hunters constantly keep a path clear for the fast photon rockets through the debris belt. [4]

Carlos Rasch, who also was involved in the planning of a 13-part sci-fi series (*Raumlotsen*/*Space Pilots*) for GDR Television and after German reunification worked as a journalist for a local paper (*Märkische Allgemeine*), passed away in a small Brandenburg community on January 7, 2021.

[4] Carlos Rasch, *Androidenjäger. Wissenschaftlich-fantastische Erzählung*. Mit Illustrationen von Hans Räde. Berlin/GDR: Verlag Neues Leben, 1961.



Meteor Swarm on Collision Course

Carlos Rasch's novel offered a welcome opportunity to build on the idea of a superior alien culture as propagated by Stanley Kubrick. Unlike the novel, *Signals* (working title: *Alarm im Weltraum*/*Alarm in Space* [5]) was just as cryptic as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (but in no way as religious as Kubrick's production, hailing extraterrestrial omnipotence) and a perfect showcase for the hoped-for breakthrough of East-German film technology.

The story takes place in the 21st century, which at the time of its making seemed as distant as the Moon and the United States that first set foot on it. The research spacecraft "Ikaros" was destroyed by meteorites near Jupiter. The search for survivors was called off as unsuccessful. Only Veikko, the commander of the "Laika", does not give up and dismisses all concerns. When the "Laika" is on the planetary belt between Mars and Jupiter, radio operator Konrad picks up unknown signals. Soon afterwards, the wreck of the "Ikaros" appears on the radar screen, but there is no trace of the crew. Did an alien intelligence want to lure them with hostile intentions? The interpretation of the radio signals as coming from an alien civilization makes the crew skeptical and uncertain. However, Veikko is convinced that beings at such a highly developed level have long since overcome the period of hostility and aggression. Thanks to these signals, Veikko and his crew actually discover survivors of the "Ikaros" who have held out for many months in a still functional piece of rubble: "This is the commander of the 'Ikaros'. After exactly 300 days the crew of the Laika has found us. We great the Earth, our home."

The Director

When it came to films that were successful (not so much with the critics but with the audience), no one at DEFA could hold a candle to director Gottfried Kolditz. Gottfried served all genres, everything that people liked to see on the big screen: film operetta (*Die schöne Lurette*, 2.8 million admissions), comedy (*Geliebte weisse Maus*, 1.5 million) and what they called in those days "Indianerfilm" – western films that clearly were on the

[5] Alarm im Weltall was the West German release title for MGM's *Forbidden Planet*.

side of the Native Americans (and in a certain way against Washington). In 1968 Kolditz took the genre "Indianerfilm" to a new level with *Spur des Falken* (*Falcon's Trail*): *The fights have momentum, the images have depth. The camera often sits at the level of the dusty street. Cameraman Otto Hanisch creates expressive views with large details in the foreground.* […] *Even if story and villains are simple, this* Trail of the Falcon *brought a professionalism to the screen that was previously unknown to DEFA regarding iconography, stoking of tension, and aesthetics of the action sequences.* [6] The production went on location under sometimes less than ideal conditions in the Caucasus.

Born on December 14, 1922, son of a court clerk and judicial assistant and a seamstress in Altenbach, Gottfried Kolditz was drafted in 1941, came to France and to the Eastern Front, and suffered a serious head injury that later caused balance and vision problems. In April 1945, right at the end of the war, he enrolled for the summer semester at the University of Leipzig but wasn't able to begin studies before July of the following year. In addition to his German studies, he studied drama and directing at the Leipzig State University of Music. In March 1949, Kolditz submitted a philological-historical dissertation with the title *Syntaktische Untersuchung der Indefinita 'sum', 'ein', 'einig' im Germanischen* [Syntactic Study of the indefinita 'sum', 'ein', 'einig' in Germanic] and finished the oral defense in December 1950. But instead of the German dictionary [*Deutsches Wörterbuch*], on which he worked as a research assistant, what really interested him was the theater. He had been involved for some time with the Leipzig Young Actors' Collective, a semi-professional theater group, and had worked as a radio speaker for Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk. Eventually, he became assistant director at theaters in Leipzig and Dresden, rose to senior drama director at the theater of Chemnitz/Karl-Marx-Stadt, and staged plays by Shakespeare, Friedrich Schiller and Maxim Gorki. In 1955 he joined DEFA as a consultant for the film opera *Zar und Zimmermann* (*The Czar and the Carpenter*), then became a director on a series of satirical shorts (*Stacheltier*) and finally feature-film director.

[6] Norbert Wehrstedt: *Indianerwestern* made in GDR. In: *Zwischen Marx und Muck*. Berlin: Henschel-Verlag, 1996.

The actor who portrayed native Americans in Kolditz' western films (*Die Spur des Falken*, the two-part *Apachen* and *Ulzana*) was actually a native Serbian born on June 13, 1940: Gojko Mitić. His father, a farmer, had joined the partisans during the war, and so Gojko and his brother Dragan grew up with their grandparents. After the war he began studying sports in Belgrade and worked part-time as supporting actor in the *Winnetou* western films produced by the West German Rialto and Constantin film companies in Yugoslavia. When the West German series slowly expired, Gojko Mitić became the star of an East German series that was introduced with *Die Söhne der grossen Bärin*/*The Sons of Great Bear*. Luckily, Mitić was a tough and physical actor: "We were filming an Indian picture in the Caucasus in the 1970s. There was a wild mustang that was essential for our production. I caught the mustang, jumped on the wild horse and stayed seated. That impressed the people around. It was a dangerous stunt. You can't do stunts so often, the risk of injury increases. I simply approached the animal, 'bridled´' it and we had this scene! The scene was filmed straight away, spontaneously." [7] Although Mitić spoke German, he was dubbed by Karl Sturm.

While Mitić is still active, Kolditz who made another (final) science-fiction film (*Im Staub der Sterne*/*In the Dust of the Stars*) in 1976 suffered a sudden cerebral hemorrhage while preparing another project (*Zimtpiraten*) in Dubrovnik and died a few days later, on June 15, 1982. His death proved a great loss for DEFA.

The Shooting

An international cast, including Mitić, also bears witness to the high value that DEFA attached to the production: Piotr Pawłowski, who had a leading part in Jerzy Kawalerowicz' monumental *Faraon* (*Pharaoh*) and played Veikko, and Irena Karel came from Poland, Yevgeny Sharikov from the USSR, Iurie Darie from Romania, Soheir Morshey from Egypt. Aubrey W. Pankey, an American-born baritone, had left the United States during the McCarthy era and emigrated to GDR. Pankey had a fatal car accident several months after the premiere of *Signals* and died on May 8, 1971. (In *Signals* he was dubbed by Wolfgang Kieling. For two years Kieling had left

[7] https://maulbeerblatt.com/alles/mit-wahl-indianer-gojko-mitic-im-gespraech/

West Germany and worked in the East. He was internationally known as Stasi agent Hermann Gromek who was killed by Paul Newman in Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain*.) On the German side, the cast was completed by Alfred Müller (well known in the role of a "Kundschafter" [scout] of the Stasi in the East-German espionage film *For Eyes Only* and at that time less known in *Das Kaninchen bin ich*/*The Rabbit Is Me*, one of a series of system-critical DEFA films all of which were banned by the ruling party's central committee), Helmut Schreiber (who was in another banned film: *Spur der Steine*/*Trace of Stones* and in several DEFA western films) and Karin Ugowski (born Karin Komischke) who was a popular character in DEFA fairy tales (*Frau Holle/Mother Holly*, *Die goldene Gans/The Golden Goose*, *König Drosselbart/King Thrushbeard*).

The extras, by the way, were filled by students who at that time lived in the GDR.

In order to cut the costs, DEFA sought a co-production agreement from the start. First, they contacted a production company in Rome. Samson Films offered as "star names" Roger Brown, bodybuilder Kirk "Maciste" Morris (a.k.a. Adriano Bellini) and Helga Liné (a.k.a. Helga Lina Stern, a Spanish actress born in Berlin) and asked for "minor" script changes, exclusive distribution rights in Western territories and a 30 percent profit share. That was the end of the negotiations. Now DEFA looked for partners in the East. A cooperation agreement negotiated with Poland and signed on April 24, 1969 stipulated that 70 percent of the budget (4.5 million marks) would be raised by the Germans and that the artistic leadership should therefore also lie in the hands of DEFA. A large part of the technically ambitious shots in space were produced in the Babelsberg studios. Only a small portion was done in the film studios of Łódź. The cooperation between the two partners ran into serious problems. The interiors of the spaceships, which were created in Poland, were inadequate and had to be improved.

Otto Hanisch, Director of Photography: *Our partners were totally overwhelmed. It started with the ceiling of the soundstage. It was too light. To simulate weightlessness, we had developed a rail system and tested it in Babelsberg. In Poland it had to be anchored in the ceiling structure and, as*

it turned out, that was not possible. The actors were hanging on wires. The camera had to be positioned vertically upwards under the actors, as they were also supposed to cover the wires. The rail route on the ceiling had to be identical to the rail route in the decoration. [8]

The consequence was that they had to move all special effects back to Babelsberg, including the costs.

A particular difficulty was that there was only a single light source in dark space – the sun. Therefore, 40 spotlights set up in the studio were only allowed to cast a single shadow. "That's why the lighting was often tedious; some shots took us around four hours," said [cameraman] Otto Hanisch, who has since been nicknamed "Lamp Otto" in the studio. A lot of tinkering also required a cost-effective representation of the unmaneuverable spaceship that was hit by a meteor shower: "It wasn't the 'Ikaros' that staggered in front of the camera, but the camera in front of the 'Ikaros'. For this purpose, I had constructed a turntable to which I was strapped which allowed to carry out all the necessary movements while rotating." [9]

The sets were designed by Erich Krüllke, Werner Pieske and Jochen Keller. They replaced Heinz Röske who was unable to participate due to illness. Not only Röske fell ill: a few days before the planned shooting date, which was set for June 1st, director Kolditz (who was indispensable of course) suffered a pulmonary infarction and a leg vein thrombosis. During filming in Poland, he required constant medical checks. It was Hanisch's duty to replace him for a while.

Essential for the film were the photographic and model effects handled by Otto Hanisch in cooperation with Kurt Marks. Marks was one of the first students at the German Academy of Film Art in Babelsberg (founded in 1954), was around when *The Silent Star* was shot and inherited the "throne" of Ernst Kunstmann (although he never became department head, just remained a workhorse [10]). Kunstmann had assisted Eugen Schüfftan in the development of a process that made use of mirrors in front of a camera and was involved in

[8] *Der komplizierte Weg zum Spielfilmkameramann. Peter Badel im Gespräch mit Otto Hanisch. In: Kamera läuft.* Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung 2007, pp. 46-47.

[9] defa-stiftung.de/stiftung/aktuelles/film-des-monats/signale-ein-weltraumabenteuer/

[10] Nominal head of the department back then was Hans-Wolfram Redecker.

all previous sci-fi epics made in Babelsberg: *Metropolis*, *Frau im Mond*, and *Der schweigende Stern*.

Kurt Marks: "For *Signals* we tried numerous trick methods. Jan-Peter Schmarje constructed special equipment, which allowed model movement in very good quality by moving object *and* camera. We illuminated the spaceships with only one light source, without any brightening. The shots themselves were made by adopting a continuous time lapse. There was a disadvantage, however, with the model mover: you couldn't see through the camera during the shooting and therefore you couldn't control the interaction between camera and model. But sometimes that's an advantage, because if something is too perfect, then it's not good. The breath of the camera must remain noticeable. Stanley Kubrick laid the foundation for special effects films in 1968 with the magnificent *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He had achieved a miracle of effects magic; never before had weightlessness been portrayed so realistically as in this picture. The optical and mechanical effects of this film seduced us to study them more closely and everything we discovered in trade papers about that film was translated and evaluated. We didn't want to imitate *2001* with our picture, we didn't have the money, but we had the ambition to achieve the best we could with our resources. […] We simulated interesting perspectives in infinite space and the lighting belied the small size of the models." [11] (The construction of the models was outsourced to HAWEGE company that specialized in manufacturing model kits.)

Worth noting is the electronic sound design, which until then was only known in American films (*Forbidden Planet*, 1956). Composer Karl-Ernst Sasse (1923-2006) was the son of a music teacher and conductor and so his talent was supported from early on. After the war, he studied conducting, piano, viola and singing at the Sondershausen Conservatory in Thuringia. On January 1, 1959 Sasse took over the musical direction of the DEFA Symphony Orchestra and composed film music for *Alaskafüchse* (*Alaska Foxes*) *Die Reise nach Sundevit* (*The Journey to Sundevit*), *Spur des Falken* (*Falcon's Trail*) and *Hauptmann Florian von der Mühle* (*Captain Florian of the Mill*).

[11] *Wie haben sie's gemacht…? Babelsberger Kameramänner öffnen ihre Trickkiste.* Marburg: Schüren 2005, pp. 104-106.

Two Voices of Criticism

DEFA and its distribution company Progress hoped for an audience of millions, but those hopes turned out to be far from reality. 120,000 East German viewers were able to attend 70mm screenings (in Berlin, Leipzig, Erfurt and Halle), roughly 50,000 saw *Signals* in 35mm Totalvision. 41 Totalvision prints were submitted on April 8, 1971. The project ended with a loss. To make matters worse, it was also criticized that the portrayed future was not a Communist one. Scenario editor Thea Richter distanced herself and complained that the Capitalist way of thinking was projected into the cosmos, into an unreal microworld, into an inhumanely over-engineered everyday life.

Review - East Germany:

Nine gentlemen and three ladies sit opposite each other in fashionable astronaut looks and throw scientific terms at each other. […] *Anyone who hopes that erotic collisions could even occur within the fatally imbalanced spaceships will be disappointed.*[12]

Review - West Germany:

Visually, the film is limited to portraying the astronaut environment in the most attractive way possible. The viewer can admire the comfortable interior of their spacecraft and complicated control panels, they can see cosmonauts standing upside down and rotating weightlessly in space, and the two attractive female crew members even put on a small fashion show […] *On the other hand, the few sequences of the cosmonauts holiday happiness on Earth are very unimaginative: there are only too many repeated images of riders on the beach, bikini mermaids frolicking playfully in sand and waves, and children playing with flying saucers in the dunes.* […] *The film does not go into more detail about the social order in 2020, but everything indicates that the population of the Earth lives together in peaceful harmony.* (sic!) […] *The Babelsberg cosmonaut story stands out from many SF films of Western provenance in that it shows a perspective, in which humans retain their place as responsible beings and are not displaced by computers or threatened by living beings from other planets.*[13]

[12] Renate Holland-Moritz in: *Eulenspiegel* 5/1971.
[13] Heinz Kersten in: *Frankfurter Rundschau* December 28, 1970.

Dr. Rolf Giesen was born on July 4th, 1953 in the Lower Rhine region, near the Durch border. He's authored numerous film books (including *Nazi Propaganda Films*, *The Nosferatu Story*, *Animation in Europe* and *The Night the Nazis Invaded Hollywood*), written screenplays for animated feature films, supervised VFX at the Babelsberg Studios right after reunification, and has left a huge collection of props and artwork to the German Cinematheque in Berlin. For 20 years he curated Ray Harryhausen's German exhibits and for another (almost) ten years lectured as visiting professor in China. He lives with his wife in a village near the Baltic Sea.

SIGNALS:
A SPACE ADVENTURE

by

Walter Chaw

I came of age during the Reagan Administration, during the rise of neoconservatism, of dangerous deregulation, in the time of a glib huckster/former actor who enjoyed the occasional joke about nuclear war against Russia so much that Russia kept itself at a nervous hair trigger, ready to retaliate. I learned to equate the Soviet Union and all the Eastern Bloc countries as our mortal enemies - the ones waiting to rain nuclear fire on my elementary school friends and I as we put our heads on our knees during drills set in the only hallway of our school without windows. I drank deep. America was the "Shining City on the Hill" and the great, slavering bear of the evil empire lurked across the Atlantic, crouched there behind a metaphorical Iron Curtain I came to equate in my mind with the Berlin Wall. My prejudices were hardwired in me and they extended not just to my belief that we were engaged in a mortal struggle with inhuman monsters, but that this alleged soullessness extended to their art: the bizarre brutalism of their national anthem during the Olympics where we actually competed against one another rather than boycotted the opportunity; their casting as cigarette-smoking gangsters, sex traffickers and other assorted villains in our popular media; the images from behind the wall of goose-stepping, missile-parading, martial cosplay. In my very limited understanding of the world, I understood we were engaged in an "arms race" - that twisted theory and practice of peace through escalation and the threat of mutually-assured destruction - but of the many things I didn't know, I didn't know we were also engaged in a *cultural* Cold War. The DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) Studio was East Germany's

Soviet-owned film production company. It was established by the Soviets immediately post-WWII in order to, among other things, produce re-education films for the conquered Germans. So strong was the Soviet belief in the power of film to influence, German cinemas reopened just three weeks after the capitulation in May of 1945. While "Soviet Realism" and the misery-pornography of the low-budget, cautionary Trümmerfilmes limited the studio's creativity and output through the 1950s, in the 1960s, it began to experiment in genre and produced a popular series of Westerns featuring East German superstar Gojko Mitić in various heroic Native American roles at odds with, and constantly outwitting, hapless American settlers and soldiers. Insult to injury, after the Soviets' recent, stunning victories in the Space Race -- the successful launching of Laika the dog into orbit in the Sputnik 2 in 1957; and then of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin in the Vostok 1 four short years later -- DEFA also dabbled in a series of science fiction films that showed cosmonauts engaged in the further exploration of a galaxy still free of American penetration. At the end of the 1950s, as a country in fear and harboring no little humiliation, the United States slept under a red sky while East German cinema poked at America's colonial past and their stuttering, abortive first steps into the future. I remember as a kid being haunted by a line in Phil Kaufman's *The Right Stuff* (1983) about the fate of the Cold War hinging on which side had the better German scientists. This, paired with knowledge that my dad earned his PhD in chemical engineering in part by learning enough German to be able to read his physics textbooks (and of course the gory atrocities Germany committed during WWII), the image I had constructed in my mind of Germans was one half bellicose and capable of acts of great violence; and one half brilliant and capable of acts of immeasurable genius. In my rush of patriotic bigotry and almost total ignorance of history unflattering to the United States, I failed to recognize how all my rationales in dehumanizing the Germans (and the Japanese) merely defined them as human.

DEFA doubled-down on America's end-of-the-1950s Cold War anxieties with Kurt Maetzig's still-sticky *The Silent Star* (1960), released in the U.S. dubbed and edited as *First Spaceship on Venus*. A loose adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's The Astronauts (so loose, Lem lobbied to have his name taken off the final product), the film begins with the discovery of a mysterious artifact buried near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River in Yeniseysk Governorate and ends with a visit to Venus in an attempt to find the source of the artifact and to decode whether the message it contains is a diplomatic salvo or an existential threat. What they find is the remnants of an advanced civilization whose bad, colonialist intentions led to a wholly-avoidable planet-ending catastrophe. The visual effect of the blasted, melted Venusian wasteland which exhausted East Germany's entire annual supply of glue, testament not only to the scarcity post-war of certain items, but of the importance the German government placed in making films to challenge the scale, and take to task the appetites, of their Western contemporaries. Given my bias, I expected the film to be a nationalistic screed about the innate superiority of a master race - something disquietingly-fascistic like Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) in which an objectively moral might makes a collective right, or disturbingly-theocratic like Gregory La Cava's authoritarian fantasy *Gabriel over the White House* (1933). Instead, *The Silent Star* lays the groundwork for a series of DEFA pictures focused on international solidarity through cooperation, dynamic problem-solving and sober reflection rather than threat and intimidation. Six full years before Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* set the template for this variety of cooperative voyages of discovery, and eight full years before Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* told its own tale of mysterious artifacts inaugurating a journey across our solar system (and Franklin Schaffner's Rod Serling-penned adaptation of another civilization's self-immolation in *Planet of the Apes*), here was this film from *East Germany*. It's not a flag-waving, chest-beating display of the Soviet's unconquerable might, the triumph of collectivism over hedonism, but of how the arrogance of a very few (including a cabal of detached, capitalist ghouls running America) will inevitably lead to the death of the planet. If this premise were ever controversial, it's not now when it's so close to coming to pass.

A full understanding of East German cinema is not possible without a better understanding of German culture and the often-contradictory pressures placed on film in this period to be not only the product of a single, all-powerful dramaturge, but also the product of a collective endeavor; an outcome that exemplifies the class ideals that perpetuate high German culture while also being a force that could erode the socialist work ethic. For me, the way I understand the East German film industry in my limited way is how I also try to grasp the Japanese film industry under American occupation and the French resistance filmmakers under Nazi occupation: that is, dimly, and with the overwhelming sense of an object created from difficult political and social guardrails and occasionally with some degree of personal risk. I also see films from these times and places as the product of forced cultural diffusion which is, of course, not restricted to (though mainly) transmission in just one direction - pockets of film that trace at an accelerated rate how we change one another just by sharing, or imposing, our stories as we inexorably trend toward an arguably inevitable cultural homeostasis. Consider Gottfried Kolditz's *Signale - Ein Welttraumabenteuer* (henceforth *Signals*) (1970) which borrows visual elements and concepts from its immediate American antecedents *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes* (belying the juicy, dehumanizing Western trope that those behind the Iron Curtain were denied the pleasures of western cinema on pain of imprisonment or death) while carrying itself like a philosophical puzzle to be solved through reasonable debate and respectful appreciation of the elements each member of a team bring to its resolution. Though individual genius is recognized, it's never the sole path to a proper resolution. I love the moment, for instance, where beefcake Terry (Mitic) pretends not to be able to complete a task just to give confidence to a less-assured compatriot, knowing that everyone's skills are going to be needed if the greater problem is to be solved.

Signals opens when the good ship Ikarus is apparently destroyed in an asteroid field on its way to Jupiter. Back on Earth, Commander Veikko (Piotr Pawlowski), not willing to leave the fate of the Ikarus up to

conjecture and the loss of a radio signal, immediately begins to assemble a hand-picked team to man his ship Laika on a rescue/recovery mission. He brings on grizzled vet Gaston (Helmut Schreiber), pretty-boy Pawel who happens to be dating one of the lost cosmonauts, Krystina (Karin Ugowski)); engineer Konrad (Alfred Müller); medic Samira (Soheir El-Morshidy) and general, but highly-skilled, functionaries Terry (Mitic, a few years before finding his niche as an avenging Native American) and Juana (Irena Karel) - all of whom appear to be spending a nice day on the beach, riding horses bare-chested and bare-backed across a bucolic beach. Kids play with drones, snatching the towels off bathing beauties while Terry and Konrad do some homoerotic footsie-wrestling in good fun. I'm not used to seeing this kind of unguarded bonhomie between two men in American film - and it seems very likely their physical comfort with one another is meant to be a literal manifestation of solidarity and collectivism - but between this episode and another in a workout sequence aboard their ship in which dialogue as loaded as the gun sequence between John Ireland and Montgomery Clift in *Red River* is exchanged, I really suspect something is going on between these guys. And godspeed. They're an adorable couple. The beach sequence, bookended by another at the end of the film, might seem a peculiar choice to portray a future Earth capable of manned space travel, but I think if the goal is to imagine a future that eschews the materialism of capitalism it makes sense that it might begin to resemble a prelapsarian paradise.

As Veikko's crew prepares to embark, Veikko's asked by his superior who will take responsibility for this journey if it proves a fool's errand, or worse, should the Laika succumb to the same fate as the Ikarus. Viekko responds that responsibility always hinges on a decision and that the nature of leadership is the willingness to make decisions. He implies that as he has risen in rank to Commander, that he has been promoted because of his willingness to make decisions and, moreover, his decisions must have been largely correct. It's an evasive, even frustrating answer that feels insubordinate to someone drilled in the language of war films. "What is responsibility but a decision made?" is more a line from Maxim Gorky or

Chekhov than John Milius. Nonetheless, it's Veikko's responsibility and he carries it heavy throughout the film. Once on their way to Jupiter, a series of conversations break out. Crewmembers talk about the burden a leader bears in keeping secrets. Should he share with only one, trust would be broken with the others and the collective would disintegrate. They affirm that the well-being of the group is ironically the most humane approach to caring for an individual; over the course of their year-long voyage, they also perform a series of spacewalks to repair their ship during which they focus on training one another and encouraging one another's success. There's not much action to speak of in *Signals* beyond one horrifying moment where a cosmonaut forgets their tether and goes shooting off into the infinity of deep space - but what there is, is a surplus of character interactions and *talking*. We also spend time with the starlost crew of the Ikarus, which has indeed survived its troubles though they're now stranded in a dead ship in a declining orbit, doing their best to buy their hoped-for rescuers time to find them. "The most important thing is you get back here in 15 minutes," their Commander (Iurie Darie) says as one of his charges prepares to perform a perilous task outside the ship. "No," Krystina responds, the fate of all of her peers on her shoulders, "it's that I find parts for a working emergency transmitter. Otherwise, we'll stay a dead piece of metal." Both crews are multiracial and multi-gendered. *Signals*, in ways surprising to my blinkered, slowly-awakening self, is aspirational, even progressive.

The special effects by Stanislaw Dülz and Kurt Marks display some exquisitely-detailed model work and a nifty zero-gravity interlude consisting of in-camera effects and wire play. The look of *Signals* is clean and sharp and, in the spinning cores of the deep space crafts, obviously evocative of Douglas Trumbull's work on *2001*. A helper robot is the ancestor of the floating orbs in Disney's *The Black Hole* (1979) and glimpses of green foliage growing inside the ship predicts another Trumbull piece: *Silent Running* (1972). With its long, slow, quiet passages, *Silent Running* is in fact the closest analogue from this period to DEFA's output in feel, pace, and its unashamed philosophical ruminations about

the place of man in the universe: particularly this film and the thoughtful, occasionally mesmerizing *Eolomea* (1972) (also, as it happens, released in the same year as Mosfilm's own Stanislaw Lem adaptation, *Solaris* (Tarkovsky, 1972)). The production design is similarly sharp with its geometrical banks of computer screens and blinking lights and mid-century mod furnishings in the ship's groovy hangout compartments. Though the star of the sequence involving the robot Eva 12-17 is meant to be Eva herself, I was more distracted by the incredible, leatherette sunken conversation pit of Konrad's workstation and how the bot serves Gaston and Konrad cocktails from incredible glass globe snifters that Juana immediately takes for herself in a gesture that is unspeakably sexually-suggestive. There is an undercurrent throughout of illicit couplings in *Signals,* set against all the carefully-choreographed machine-coupling that is as unmistakable here as it is, again, in Kubrick's *2001* and *Dr. Strangelove*. There was maybe never a swinging mod-period in Berlin Wall-era East Germany, but *Signals* asks the question of *what if there were*?

Otto Hanisch's cinematography is sensual and playful, too. Note a scene at around the fifty-minute mark where Veikko speaks with Pawel while flipping through Pawel's dissertation. "Do you like it?" Pawel asks. "No" says Veikko and we see that all the pages of the bound document are blank. Hanisch's camera sways, queasy, seasick throughout the exchange - now following Pawel as he wanders around Veikko's office; now showing what we presume is Pawel's point of view, swimming and shimmying, zooming in and out as Pawel swoons and pitches. I wonder if the blank book is a prop error that plays. In other words, I love that we have reached a point in this voyage as we might in any literary voyage of extended length and difficulty, where everyone is going a little mad. The ghost sequence of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or chapter 94 of Moby Dick in which the manual labor of squeezing coagulating fluids from a recently-felled sperm whale sends our hero into a rapturous hallucination of fragrant fields and spring days as he and his fellows squeeze one another's hands in the confused ecstasy of their task. Krystina, as a hint to the possible derangement being experienced by her crew, asks her commander at one

Dx-12

point how many anti-anxiety pills he has left. The dissertation is either intentionally blank, though both Pawel and Veikko think they are reading a version of it; accidentally blank meaning that the filmmakers have shared in the mania of the play; or some combination of the two states reminding the audience that they are watching an agreed-upon fiction that has pulled us into its delirium. The 70mm camera is restless in this scene in a way it never really is again. Their conversation revolves around the finality of death, the fear of again, the nature of the word "why" which Veikko defines as the most "human of questions." Pawel is raging against the mission in this scene, he with the most to gain for being reunited with his lost love. I think he's afraid. He rails at his commander, the camera raves with him, and when he's done he apologizes and the camera fixes again, sober and steady.

With just a few minutes to go, the Laika finally comes upon the disabled Ikarus. I love how this entire climactic moment is underplayed, a MacGuffin for not just the audience but the crew. The journey was the thing for the Laika, just as it was for the Ikarus. There are no lessons from reunion, only from separation and loss. A moment to wonder about the naming of two ships after figures who, famously, die in their separate pursuits of knowledge. Icarus, son of the inventor Daedalus, steals a pair of wax and feather wings from his father and ignoring his admonition to not fly too close to a sun that will melt his only means of conveyance, falls to his death. Laika, the street dog rescued by the Soviet space program only to be shot into space where she lived for up to nine hours before succumbing to the heat from a failed heat shield in the midst of her historic orbits around the planet. It seems to be of a kind with naming a new ship "Titanic" or a new airship "Hindenburg." Is *Signals* being ironic? I don't think so. In the Carlos Rausch source material, the Ikarus is called "AJ-408" - so the literary allusions are DEFA's: the one from a romantic fable about man's indomitable curiosity and perhaps even foolhardy pursuit of experience; the other potentially a pointed-jab at the West, a reminder that the exact will-to-power of Icarus's folly led to Laika's sacrifice and, ultimately, to the Soviet's victory in the first steps

into the universe. So, not ironic, but very probably barbed and certainly in keeping with the Soviet character of piquant, pyrrhic victories won against unimaginable odds and indestructible foes.

Near the end, Veikko finally answers one of the "why" questions posed to him along the way: with the Ikarus in sight, he is asked "why go after the Ikarus?" and, related to that question, "why do you think anyone is still alive?" Veikko says "chance is the complement to and manifestation of necessity." To my ear, it sounds like he's saying that there was a part of him that needed it to be true and so, because of his need, chance became viable as a quantum consequence of it. Indeed, like Schrodinger's Cat, all Veikko knows is that a possibly fatal element had been exposed to the Ikarus but until he knew its fate for sure, the Ikarus was in a state of both completeness *and* completely destroyed-ness. The urgency of his need to know defines the shape of the box - and a box by its nature contains the equal chance of either reality until it's "opened." Refer to an interrupted animated sequence in the middle of the film, a play-within-a play that comments on the themes of the drama in which it's encased. Gaston's love life is lampooned as a dalliance, facilitated by a panderous Eva 12-17. Oafish Gaston must be reminded to make love to the lovely woman in bed next to him and then the third act of the cartoon opens with the dedication of a statue of a naked Gaston in a town square. At this point the show is interrupted and the crew leaves, but Gaston stays behind. He's been roasted, it's true, but the final joke of being immortalized for needing to be reminded to perform a natural act is strangely vicious. How will it resolve? Is the film a goad to Gaston to retire finally? To what extent is *Signals* a warning about dehumanization? Is it an admonition about all the time you didn't spend on the beach as you're distracted by all the windmills that need tilting at? Maybe it's about the zero sum game of living in fear, in playing games where the only winning move is not to play, in failing to be the hero of your own life in the company of capable people who are the heroes of theirs. *Signals* is a box that contains two possibilities for us: that we die alone chasing meaning, or we die reaching for the sun in sight of the people whom we love and who love us back.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times, Washington Post, Criterion, The LA Weekly, NY Post's Decider, NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."

IN THE DUST OF THE STARS
IM STAUB DER STERNE

DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme (GDR 1975/76)
Artistic Working Group "futurum" in Orwocolor
In Cooperation with Buftea Studios, Romania

Written and Directed by GOTTFRIED KOLDITZ

Assistant Director: Sigrid Meyer. *Dramaturgy:* Joachim Hellwig. *Director of Photography:* Peter Süring. *Camera Assistants:* Dieter Lück, Heinz Pufahl. *Special Photography:* Kurt Marks. *Still Photographer:* Heinz Pufahl. *Art Director:* Gerhard Helwig. *Set Construction:* Peter Zakrzewski, Hans-Joachim Schwarz. *Make-up Artists:* Bernhard Kalisch, Regina Reinhard. *Costume Design:* Katrin Johnsen. *Sound:* Christian Müller. *Sound Mixer:* Christfried Sobczyk. *Choreography:* Cornel Patrichi, Inka Unverzagt. *Music:* Karl-Ernst Sasse. *Production Manager:* Helmut Klein. *Unit Managers:* Horst Schmidt, Werner Fritzsche.

Cast:

Jana Brejochvá (Commander Akala), Alfred Struwe (Suko, Navigator), Ekkehard Schall (Boss), Milan Beli [Milan Bosiljcic] (Ronk, Director of the Surveillance Center), Sylvia Popovici (Illic, Onboard Doctor), Violeta Andrei (Rall, Energy Therapist), Leon Niemczyk (Thob, Analyst), Regine Heintze (My, Psychologist), Mihai Mereuţă (Kte), Ștefan Mihăilescu-Brăila (Xik), Aurelia Dumitrescu (Chta), Dorin Ganea (Prott), Zephy Alsec (Engineer at the hangar), Hans-Ulrich Lauffer, Carlo Schmidt, Stefan Schütz, Jürgen Huth and Erich Loebel (Engineers), Anke von Lenski, Gerhild Leider, Rosita Schlägel, Edith Grott, Christine Weinbach, Rita Wetzel, Gerda Stecher, Doris Schilling, Karin Breuer, Evelyn Otto, Clarissa Freistedt, Franziska Steinke, Karin Jäckel, Sylvia Kühnel, Ilona Bürger, Renate Goldhuber, Helga Teuschler, Inge Grunwald-Herrmann, Margitta Preil, Karin Schröder-Kornatis, Astrid Geppert, Erika Bethke, Rosemarie Schulz and Hannelore Fiedler (Female Temers), Dieter Blum, Jürgen Müller and Günter Rominski (Male Temers), Gabriele Acker, Evelyne Hilbert, Christel Schulz, Ines Götze and Liane Kanitz (CHTA Girls), Walter Ruge, Hans Schmidt, Götz Eckardt and Horst Fiedler (Bald-headed), Mahara-Marianne Cochlar (Snake Lady), Die Glorias (Net Jumpers), Dance Group of Pädagogische Hochschule [Pedagogical College] Potsdam.

Dubbing Voices: Renate Rennhack (Akala), Gerhard Paul (Ronk), Gerda-Luise Thiele (Illic), Ute Göhring (Rall), Eberhard Mellies (Thob), Helmut Schellhardt (Kte), Joachim Konrad (Xik), Karin Reif (Chta).

35mm, 2732 m=8963 ft. *Color by* Orwocolor. Widescreen. *Running Time:* 99 minutes (24 fps), 95 minutes (25 fps). *GDR Distribution:* Progress Film-Vertrieb, Berlin. *East-German Poster designed by:* Bernd Schubert. *Premiere: July 1, 1976,* Eisenhüttenstadt, Freilichtbühne [Open-Air Stage] "Dielower Höhe". *Regular Release Date:* July 9, 1976. *First Broadcast on East-German TV:* November 2, 1977.

Poland: October 15, 1977, W gwiezdnym pyle. *Hungary:* May 8, 1978, A leigázottak bolygója. *Romania:* Revoltă în cosmos. *USSR:* В пыли звёзд, *World Sales:* In the Dust of the Stars.

Credits courtesy of Rolf Giesen

IN THE DUST OF THE STARS

by

Rolf Giesen

Love 2000

East-German DEFA (Deutsche Film AG) was divided into several working groups: collectives of directors, writers, scenario editors and technical personnel. One of these groups was named *defa futurum*. Its spiritual father was Joachim Hellwig (1932-2014), a convinced supporter of the state doctrine with best connections to the studio brass. Hellwig's career began as a film projectionist, unit manager at the DEFA dubbing department and assistant to the documentary film director Andrew Thorndike. Based on a directive from the Ministry of Culture, the new collective founded by Hellwig was supposed to act as a cultural and artistic center for the development and production of *future films* (Zukunftsfilme) of all genres, documentaries as well as feature films. Hellwig and his close confidant Claus Ritter (1929-1995) had already thought up but not realized ideas for documentaries that dealt with topics of the future: *Utopia 2000* a.k.a. *Reise ins 3. Jahrtausend* (*Journey into the 3rd Millennium*, 1969) and *Abenteuer Zukunft* (*Adventure Future*, 1970). In 1964 Hellwig and Ritter had published a *Sittengeschichte vom Film,* a moral story of film: *Papas Kino* [*Dad's Cinema*] and in 1972 *Tiefe Leinwand* [*Deep Screen*]. The duo interpreted *Zukunftsfilm*, however, differently than science fiction. Actually, Ritter was a declared opponent of U.S. and West European science fiction. He considered it vulgar and reactionary, particularly the tentacled monsters, robots and bodybuilding-shaped heroes of the West German *Perry Rhodan* pulps created by Clark Darlton (Walter Ernsting) and Karl-Herbert Scheer. In 1973 Ritter and Hellwig devoted a 6-minute documentary to this *Welt der Gespenster* that was musically accompanied by the song *Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!* and premiered on January 4, 1974: "This world of specters is not our world! Future will be as *we* want it!" Everything was to proceed according to Marxist-Leninist

social prognosis which was based on Historical Materialism and resulted in the era of Communism. *World of Specters* was the ideological starting point of *defa futurum*. Documentary films should limit the influence from the West and prepare the youth of the GDR for a Socialist future, instill strength, courage and perseverance, fight small-mindedness, despair and discouragement in difficult situations. With this in mind, *defa futurum* produced another 25-minute documentary that propagated ethical gender relations and was shown not in regular cinemas but in discos: *Liebe 2000* (*Love 2000*). The look resembled somehow Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*.

All members of the new collective met regularly with scientists in a *Workshop Future* (*Werkstatt Zukunft*), but the discussions remained theoretical and academic. In fact, Hellwig and Ritter strived to go beyond documentaries and produce real feature films. In this situation they were lucky enough to win a true feature film director for their project: Dr. Gottfried Kolditz had already participated in the planning of futurum's three-part short film series based on *Werkstatt Zukunft* (*Workshop Future*). Kolditz had made quite popular films, among them a science fiction feature film which was not that successful but very expensive and even produced in DEFA 70, on 70mm film stock: *Signals: A Space Adventure* (*Signale – Ein Weltraumabenteuer*) that was inspired by Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Star Trek

The real competition between the different political systems of the two German states, the German Democratic Republic (East) and the Federal Republic of Germany (West), took place in the media, primarily on television. Apart from exceptions where TV reception was impaired (the Dresden Elbe basin nicknamed "Valley of the Clueless"), the citizens of the GDR watched West-German television. In May 1972, Second German Television (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) started *Star Trek* in West Germany under the title *Raumschiff Enterprise*. No one in the East had any idea that *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry had partly based his series on a sci-fi picture from East Germany: *Der schweigende Stern* (*The Silent Star*) which was shown in the USA as *First Spaceship on Venus* and syndicated by Desilu, the original *Star Trek* production company.

Kolditz most likely knew the series and, despite the lukewarm response to his previous sci-fi epic, entered another sci-fi adventure. Like Ritter he was familiar with science fiction from Western countries, but contrary to Ritter he didn't despise it completely. He even might have noticed the 1964 Paramount picture *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* conceived by Ib Jørgen Melchior and directed by Byron Haskin: *A lone U.S. astronaut pitted against all the odds beyond this earth.* This Robinson of the future discovers human-looking slaves on Mars forced to work in mines for alien warlords. This time Kolditz wouldn't base his script on another writer's book (as was the case with *Signals* that was based on a novel by Carlos Rasch). This time the script was based on his own reading and film experiences. But he needed an ideological pretext to satisfy Hellwig and Ritter – and found it in the first Soviet science fiction film *Aelita* by Yakov Protazanov which told of a revolution of the working class on Mars.

Rebellion on TEM 4 (Film Synopsis)

After a six-year journey through the galaxy, the spaceship "Cynro" lands, not without difficulty, on the inhospitable (desert) planet TEM 4, from which a call for help has been received. The crew consists of four women – Illic, the ship's doctor, psychologist My, an energy therapist named Rall and the commander – and two men: Thob the analyst and Suko the

navigator. With this predominantly female cast, Kolditz was braver than Roddenberry who favored a male commander.

In a strange vehicle that resembles a converted bus a girl arrives, dressed in a kind of Aztec costume. The girl speaks their language ("Welcome! Welcome!") and asks to be introduced to the commander of the spaceship:

"My name is Akala," the commander introduces herself. – "Welcome, commander, I am Chta. Please follow me. Everything is prepared for the reception." They enter the bus. Only Suko, the skeptical navigator, remains back on board.

"Is there no water anywhere?" Thob wants to know when he sees the sterile landscape. – "There is a big sea in the north, and in the south too," Chta excuses the monotony around.

Once they arrive at the Control and Monitoring Center of TEM 4, Akala gets straight to the point and explains the reason for their mission. "We bring greetings from the inhabitants of planet Cynro. A few years ago – this period of time is due to the enormous distance of our solar systems – we received a call for help from your planet. We didn't get any radio contact to find out what happened. So, here we are. What kind of help do you need?"

Ronk, the head of the Surveillance Center, acts surprised and denies, "We don't need any help." – "But we received a call for help from you," insists Thob. – Ronk waves it off, "Back then we erected a large radio installation but it turned out to be unsuitable. And so we stopped trying and discontinued. We didn't think the signals were being received anywhere." – "Well, if that's the case," Akala shrugs her shoulders, "we can start the journey back straight away." – "Yes, you can," Ronk agrees.

Thob cannot believe what he hears, "A very long way for such a short answer." He gets nothing but laughter from the Temers (the inhabitants of TEM 4). Akala also seems annoyed, but keeps her composure, "Our spaceship has to be made ready for take-off again. This will take at least three to four days."

Meanwhile, Ronk awaits instructions from the top. He receives orders not to use violence but to encourage the unwelcome guests to leave. An exhilarating party is arranged for them. The "Cynro" crew attends in skin-tight red vinyl suits (costume designer Katrin Johnsen was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1929). Cocktails and food are served. Akala tries some small talk, "You were talking about a large radio system this morning. What was the point of your experiments?" – "I assume you are familiar with such shenanigans. I'm sure you also have experts like that who are constantly squinting their eyes and ears at distant galaxies, otherwise you wouldn't be here, would you?"

Scantily clad female dancers float around with twitching movements. There were two choreographers assisting Kolditz in staging the dances: Inka Unverzagt, who received her first ballet lessons at the age of six, and Cornel Patrichi from Romania.

Ronk continues to trivialize and ridicule the matter.

The cosmonauts return to the spaceship totally drunk, singing, charmed and mentally influenced by the Temers. Even Akala seems impressed by the show they were given, "The Temers are happy people, cheerful and a little crazy. We'll start straight away tomorrow morning. Our flight mission has been fulfilled. Why waste our precious time?" – Only Suko keeps a cool head. Apparently, the returnees are not entirely clear-headed. Maybe some drugs were mixed into the guests' food to affect their consciousness.

Suko suspects that the planet they call TEM 4 is no more than a colony of TEM 3. He secretly sets off an exploratory flight with a probe. But the Temers take him down as he circles over a secret area. Suko escapes into a tunnel. Down there, in the mines, the proletarians toil, the pitiful workers enslaved by the rulers of TEM 3. Their fate is reminiscent of that of the underground workers in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or the mining town in Jules Verne's novel *Les Indres Noires* (*The Child of the Cavern*, 1877), while the *jeunesse*, the youth of TEM, revel in luxury above. The workers introduce themselves to Suko as Turis and explain that this is their planet and that they were the ones who sent the radio message.

When Akala finally has a meeting in the mirror chambers of the Boss, who keeps a poisonous snake as a pet, soldiers bring in the slumped Suko who was tortured by the Temers. Akala returns with him to the spaceship, "We're leaving in 36 hours."

"He tries to remember something, but he can't," says psychologist My, looking at the suffering Suko. "He's mentally blocked." – "Mentally blocked?" Akala seems worried, "When I was with their Boss, I suddenly had the feeling that I couldn't think what I actually wanted to."

To restore Suko's memory, Thob shows him aerial photos of the area he flew over. At the last slide, Suko wakes up for a moment as if electrified. He points to a shaft and begins to scream, "Down there! The Turis! It's their planet!" Then he collapses again.

"Is it possible," Akala asks, "that we are all mentally blocked?" – "If that's the case," My answers, "there must be something that we can't think about, can't say, and haven't said since we were blocked." The computer will have to figure this out by comparing their conversations. In a matter of seconds, the computer conveys the words that had been erased from her mind: *Call for help*! A short time later, Thob discovers the entrance to the slave underworld and makes contact with the Turis.

The Boss hears the report with obvious displeasure. He threatens the loser Ronk with a device on which Suko was already tortured. It looks like an electric chair. Ronk gets scared and tries to pull his neck out of the noose, "Boss, I have the solution, a fantastic idea." There is an underground watercourse at the landing site of the spaceship. Ronk suggests to pump it up so that the spaceship would be washed out if the people from Cynro don't take off at once.

Akala, who doesn't know that the treacherous Temers are preparing to drive them away, has another conference with the Boss. The Boss has dyed his hair red and makes his girls dance for him. "I need distraction if I want to concentrate," he apologizes. "I have thought a lot about you, my dear. You Cynro people, what kind of people are you? What drives you around the galaxy? What laws govern your actions?" Akala uses all

her diplomacy, "Our first law is: *No human being should oppress another*." The Boss smiles contemptuously, "That's a nice thought, but the Turis have no culture. You see, once you've left our planet and are on your way home, it won't take long before the Turis will think they've dreamed it all. Gods descended from heaven. They were friendly and disappeared. They may pray to these gods and their humble lives will gain some brightness. Nothing more – and that's a lot." (Interestingly, he repeats the credo of pre-astronautics, which in those days was very widespread in the West, represented by Robert Charroux, Erich von Däniken and others.) The Boss shakes his head, "For me there is only one law: *power*!" Akala sighs, "I understand. Rule number one: What's up stays up. And rule number two: Those who are at the bottom will stay there." The Boss nods, "That's exactly how it is. Or do you want to give the Turis weapons?" Akala shakes her head, "Obviously you can only think in the most primitive forms of violence." The Boss interrupts: No power in the galaxy will drive him from this planet!

Chta, the native girl in Aztec clothes, warns the Cynro crew that the Temers plan to flood the area around the spaceship, "The pumping station must be shut down. We will help you with that." Ronk shoots Suko while the Cynro ship takes off. Akala, who knows that Suko was in love with her, has decided to stay. She gives her dead lover a final kiss. The Turis lay him out. Now they have a martyr who died for the inevitable uprising. Nothing will stop them and the revolutionary course of history.

Shooting Foreign Landscapes in Romania

The extraterrestrial crater landscape and the salt mines were filmed in Romania, thanks to the cooperation of the Romanian National Film Studios in Buftea, 16 kilometers northwest of Bucharest. The lot was built between 1952 and 1958 on a 30-hectare site. One of the five soundstages was so large that the interior of the Milan Scala could be reproduced there. Occasionally, companies from the West produced here, including Artur Brauner and Robert Siodmak wo used the lot for their epic *Kampf um Rom* (*The Last Roman*). However, the Romanian laboratories had some problems with the East-German Orwo film stock as they were used to Eastman Color.

The Central Institute for Isotope and Radiation Research of the GDR supported the production by providing the electronic image evaluation device »Densitron«.

Although GDR had abandoned the costly 70mm process after *Hauptmann Florian von der Mühle* (*Captain Florian of the Mill*) starring Manfred Krug, Konrad Wolf's *Goya*, *Orpheus in der Unterwelt* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*) and two sci-fi films (*Signals* by Kolditz and *Eolomea* by Herrmann Zschoche), and although *In the Dust of the Stars* needed only a few FX shots, Kolditz' second sci-fi movie cost 4.3 million marks but proved more successful than his first venture into the future. In the first thirteen weeks, the film attracted 800,000 viewers.

The Cast

Commander Akala was one of the best performances by Jana Brejchová. Brejchová, born January 20, 1940 in Prague, was in Karel Zeman's *Baron Prášil* (*The Fabulous Baron Munchausen*). She was seen in both East German (*Der Traum des Hauptmann Loy/Captain Loy's Dream*) and West German films (*Schloss Gripsholm/Gripsholm Castle*, *Das Haus in der Karpfengasse/The House in Karp Lane*). In 1958 she married director Miloš Forman. The couple divorced in 1962. A second marriage followed with Ulrich Thein, her co-star in *Captain Loy*; a third with Vlastimil Brodský, the protagonist of *Jakob der Lügner* (*Jacob the Liar*), the only DEFA movie ever nominated for an Academy Award; and a fourth with actor Jiří Zahajský.

Her partner in *In the Dust of the Stars* was Alfred Struwe (1927-1998). Since his father was against his wish to become an actor, Struwe had to attend a police academy after the war until it was closed in 1948 and he could really devote himself to acting. He had been on screen since 1954 and later became a regular guest on GDR TV as dentist Dr. Alexander Wittkugel in the series *Zahn um Zahn* (*Tooth by Tooth*).

Navigator Thob was played by Polish actor Leon Niemczyk (1923-2006). In 1959 Niemczyk had a part in Jerzy Kawalerowicz' *Pociąg* (*Night Train*), in 1960 in *Krzyżacy* (*Knights of the Black Cross*) by Aleksander Ford, in 1962

in Roman Polański's *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*). He appeared in 20 DEFA productions and in 2006 appeared in David Lynch's experimental psychological thriller *Inland Empire*.

The focus of attention, even though he only appears 50 minutes into the film, is Ekkehard Schall (1930-2005) as the cynical Boss. In 1952, famed playwright Bertolt Brecht brought young Schall to his Berliner Ensemble theatre company. His best-known role on the renowned stage was the title part in *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (*The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*). Schall had been married to Brecht's daughter Barbara since 1961.

A Film that Leaves You Speechless

In the Dust of the Stars, the swan song of DEFA science fiction, was released while *Star Wars* was still in production. When *Star Wars* came out, DEFA decided to give up on space films completely, much to the regret of the technical employees who liked the utopian scenarios. Defa futurum produced another feature film in 1978/79, again under the direction of Gottfried Kolditz: *Das Ding im Schloss* (*The Thing in the Castle*), a story about a "rejuvenation machine" starring (old) Erwin and (young) Alexander Geschonneck, Vlastimil Brodský, Karin Ugowski and Milan Beli, who played Ronk in *Dust of the Stars*. For both futurum and Kolditz, this was the last feature film. Defa futurum was dissolved in 1981. Kolditz died on June 15, 1982 in Dubrovnik during the preparation of a new movie.

The reviews were mixed although the audience response was great and the psychedelic atmosphere of some scenes caused astonishment in the East.

A very challenging DEFA project where they tried to copy the more elaborate feature films from the West with skill and improvisation. [14]

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The utopian story also reflects very current political problems, which could be summarized as follows: How do you practice class struggle and international solidarity in a situation when the balance of power forces opposing social systems to peacefully coexist? Nevertheless, the film is neither an ideological lesson nor a work of art with philosophical depth like Tarkovsky's Solaris*. Fritz Lang's* Metropolis *was more likely to be the inspiration. Director Gottfried Kolditz aims for external attractiveness and exciting entertainment.* [15]

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Gottfried Kolditz produced a standard entertainment film that, in addition to showcasing foreign people, also featured modern clothing, colorful interior architecture, music and a little bare skin. [16]

[14] Klaus Brüne (ed.), *Lexikon des internationalen Films.* Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993.
[15] Heinz Kersten, 1976, quoted from *So viele Träume. DEFA-Film-Kritiken aus drei Jahrzehnten.* Berlin: Vistas Verlag, 1996.
[16] Michael Grisko in: *apropos: Film 2002. Das Jahrbuch der DEFA-Stiftung.* Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2002.

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For me, this is astonishing film. Whenever you think that the planet's limits have been reached, that the well of tastelessness has been exhausted, a new poisonous snake in the cold buffet or another veil dance of the slave ballet that is trying to be wicked and nefarious requires a sad correction. […] *Isn't it a classic case of simplifying an extraordinarily complicated, heroic, tragic and demanding reality – world politics and the problem of revolution for the mind of Little Fritz?* [17]

*

This film leaves you speechless. When the lights go on in the cinema, you don't know exactly whether what you've just seen was terrible or extremely good – but you know that what you've just seen was sensational in a way. In the Dust of the Stars *is conceived as a "utopian", "scientific-fantastic" film, and the fact that you can say so is because it was produced by DEFA in 1976 and the term science fiction was avoided in the GDR wherever possible. So it's utopian – in that respect, the film fully lives up to its claim. However, in the future that it designs, countless elements are included that are clearly borrowed from GDR reality, not to forget the ideological aspect.* […]

It is clear what kind of socio-political conflict is presented here: an evil, ugly, materialistic minority (Boss, Ronk) subjugates good, well-behaved, hard-working masses (miners); the saviors are Akala and her friends, who are shaped by socialist values. Added to this are silly pseudo-erotic interludes, GDR items and the not exactly visionary ideas of future. […]

Nevertheless, In the Dust of the Stars *is not a heartlessly cobbled-together political parable, because the way the film continues after Suko has discovered the miners is extremely surprising and irritating. Anyone who thinks that Kolditz would let his otherwise quite entertaining film end in a way that the good-evil scheme would lead one to expect is mistaken. And given this enormous plus point, it is quite bearable that there is at least as much GDR as science fiction involved.* [18]

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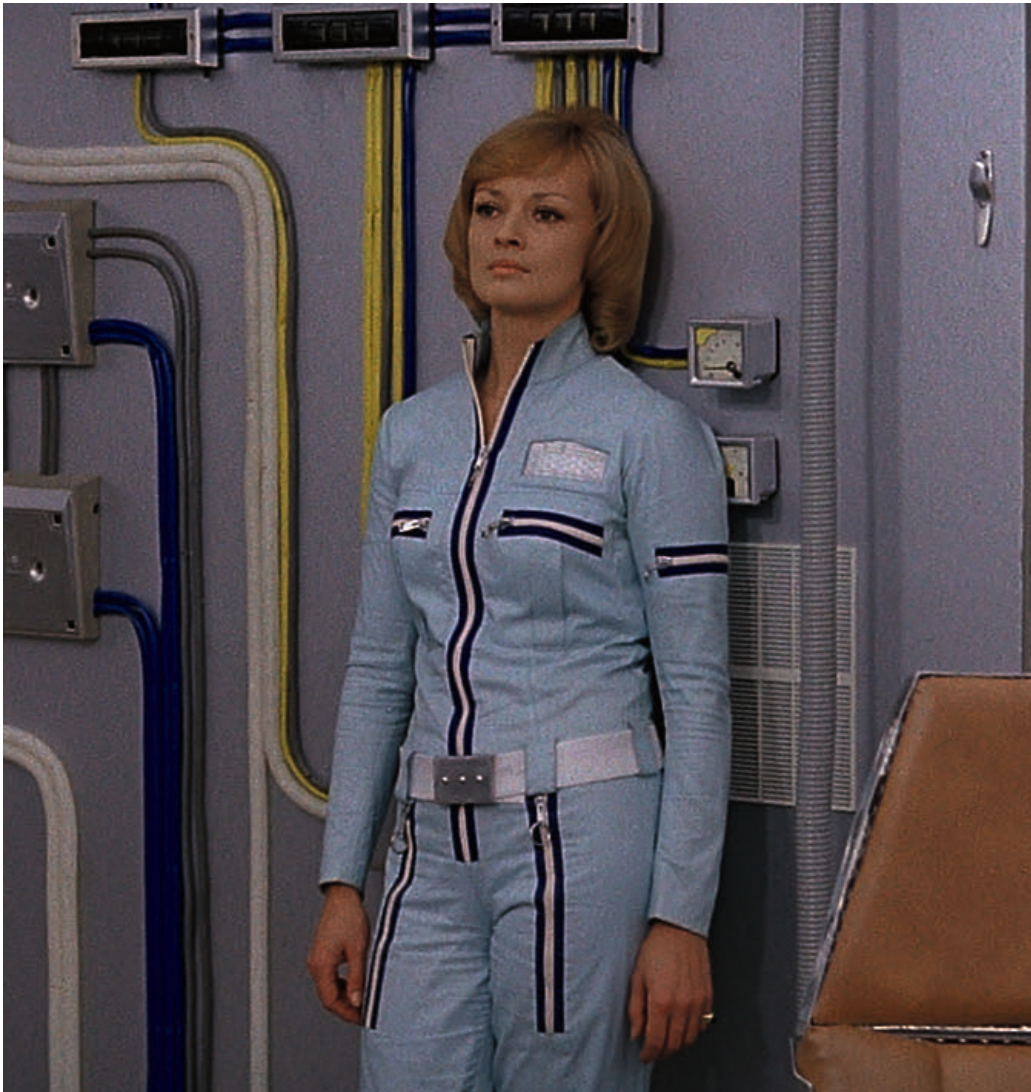
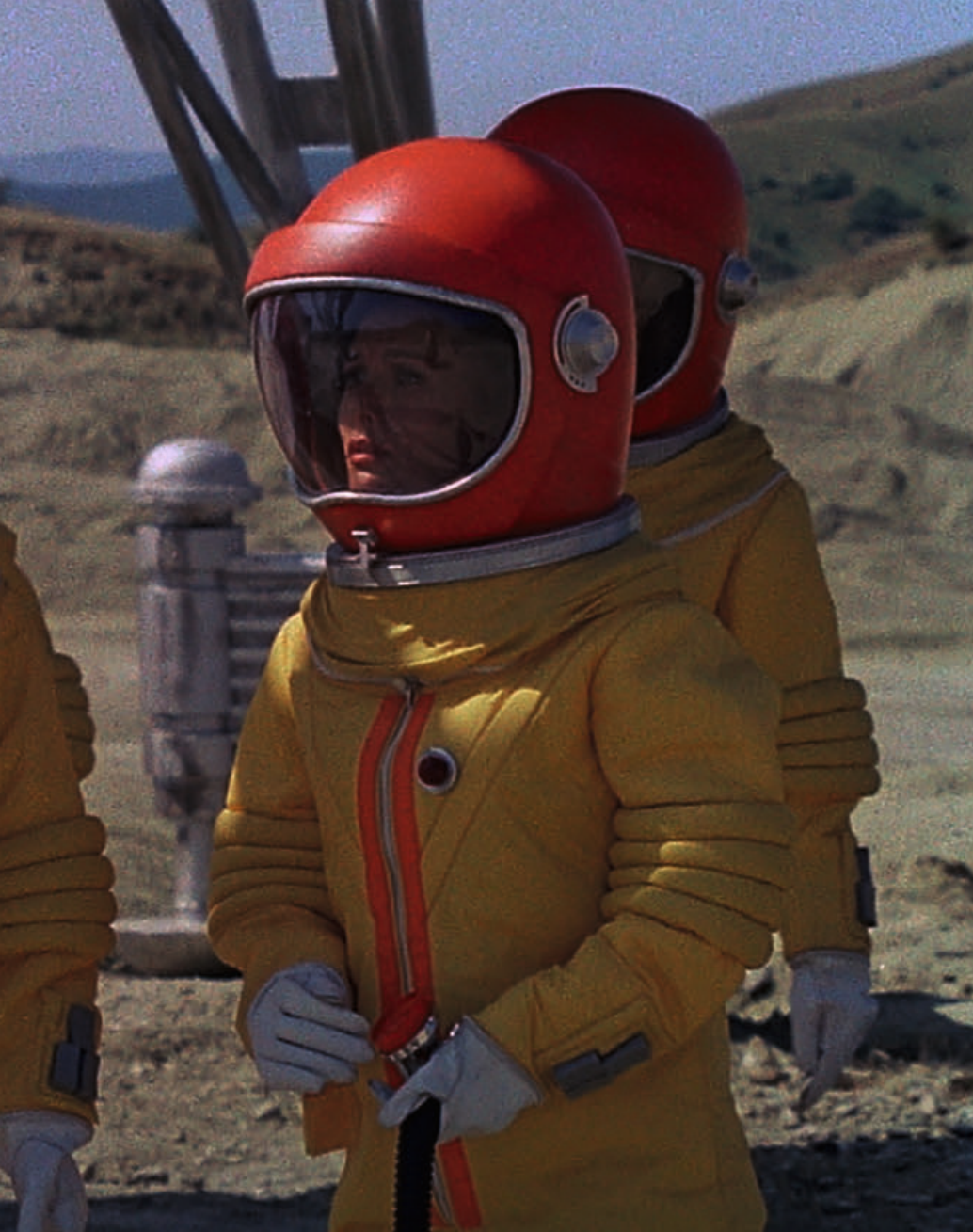
[17] Peter Ahrens in: *Weltbühne* 32/1976.

[18] Friederike Haupt, *Zurück in die Zukunft: DDR meets Science Fiction: "Im Staub der Sterne"– eine Mischung, die ihresgleichen sucht.* June 9, 2004. Leipzig-almanach.de/2004/06/09/zurueck-in-die-zukunft

And that is why *In the Dust of the Stars*, like all good science fiction, is a reflection of the social conditions of the present that gave rise to the respective work of art.



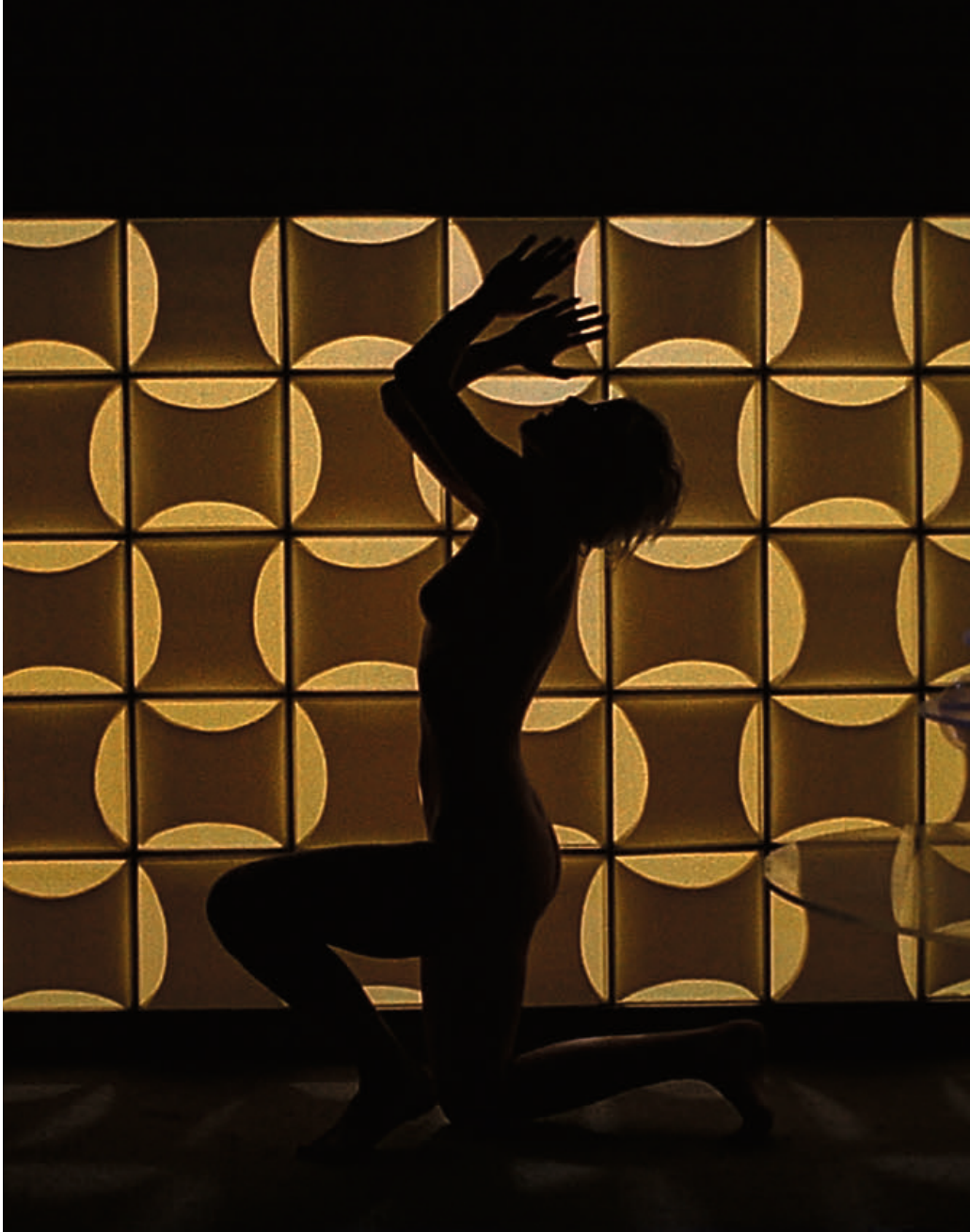


Thoughts are Faster than Light: IN THE DUST OF THE STARS

by

Jennifer Lynde Barker

Popular memory often places *Star Wars* (1977) as the beginning of the science fiction film explosion, but the genre had been enjoying immense popularity already for some time. It reaches back into early film, and there are notable classics from each decade—from Méliès' delightful trick film *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and the constructivist *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924) to B-movie horror *The Blob* (1958), CinemaScope spectacle *Forbidden Planet* (1956), and dystopian noir *Alphaville* (1965). But sci fi really began to hit its stride in the midcentury. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in particular, ushered in a focus on modern aesthetics that elevated the formal aspirations of many a filmmaker—not that science fiction films had *not* been a hot bed of innovative style over the years! Who can forget the robot Maria's dance in *Metropolis* (1927) or Barbarella's fantastical plastic, fur, and metal-wear? Yet *2001*'s art house panache and existential philosophy inspired many a film that might otherwise have been mired in mediocrity. The 1970s was thus a decade in which sci fi films were often striking, thoughtful, and strange. Movies like *Crimes of the Future* (1970), *THX 1138* (1971), *Solaris* (1972), *Fantastic Planet* (1973), *Phase IV* (1974), *Space is the Place* (1974), *Rollerball* (1975), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), *Scenes with Beans* (1976), and *Galaxy Express 999* (1979) moved the bar on weird yet deep. East Germany was no exception, and produced three memorable examples of the genre: *Signals: A Space Adventure* (1970), *Eolomea* (1972), and *In the Dust of the Stars* (1976).



If one has expectations of what an East German sci fi film from 1976 might be, then *In the Dust of the Stars* (*Im Staub der Sterne*) certainly lives up to and surpasses them. From futuristic fashion to gratuitous backlit gyrating, ubiquitous pythons, and an uncompromisingly stern ending, it is an eccentric, entertaining, and enlightening sci fi flick. Written and directed by Gottfried Kolditz, it follows the (mis)adventures of a small crew from the planet Cynro who arrive on planet TEM 4 in response to a distress call. After a near crash, they are approached by a young woman, Chta (Aurelia Dumitrescu), who takes them to the capital of the Temian people. The city is surrounded by barren desert and proves to be a fortress, with men uniformly dressed as soldiers and women dancing and cavorting in bikinis for the entertainment of the hedonistic Chief (Ekkehard Schall). The ship's commander, Akala (Jana Brejchová), tries to peacefully make contact with them and provide the requested aid, but is rebuffed by Ronk (Milan Beli), a belligerent fellow who says they don't want help, and suggests they leave. The crew keeps finding themselves drawn back into the city, however, and gradually they unravel the mystery of the distress call, which came from the Turi, the indigenous population of the planet. Enslaved by the Temians, the Turi find the arrival of the cosmonauts an impetus for revolution.

In the Dust of the Stars was a DEFA production—as were *Signals* and *Eolomea*. DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) was East Germany's state-owned film studio, and *The Silent Star* (1960, released in the U.S. as *First Spaceship on Venus*) was their first sci fi film. Co-produced with Film Studio Wroclaw and directed by Kurt Maetzig, it was based on Polish writer Stanislaw Lem's novel *The Astronauts* (1951). In the film, cosmonauts travel to Venus to decipher a message discovered in the Gobi Desert which is Venusian in origin. They discover not only that the Venusians had intended to destroy Earth, but that their civilization had perished during a nuclear war. The threat of their atomic weapons remains, however, and serves as a warning to the humans. Interpreting interplanetary messages seems to be a standard trope in East German sci fi films, and *Signals,* also directed by Kolditz, is centered on reading signals from other civilizations in outer space. *Eolomea* (1972), directed by Herrmann Zschoche and based on a book by Bulgarian writer Angel Wagenstein, also places mysterious signals at the heart of its story, with

cosmonauts searching for answers and new life light years away. *In the Dust of the Stars* continues this tradition, as the spaceship from Cynro is meant to answer a distress call from TEM 4. In all four films, this signal from across the galaxy is not what it seems; hence, investigation and misunderstanding are central themes of the films—imbued with personal and political relevance.

In the Dust of the Stars was written and directed by Gottfried Kolditz and co-produced with Buftea Film Studios in Romania. It was also a part of the artistic project defa futurum, headed by Joachim Hellwig (who was the film's dramaturg), which explored a socialist perspective relevant to the future. Kolditz (1922-1982) studied literature, directing, and acting in Leipzig before becoming a theater director in the early 1950s. In 1955 he began working at DEFA studios in Potsdam-Babelsberg as a musical advisor and director of short films. He then directed close to twenty feature films, most of which were genre-based—including the thriller *White Blood* in 1959, fairy and folk tales *Snow White* and *The Golden Yurt* in 1961, and westerns *Apaches* and *Ulzana* in 1973. He was especially successful with his musical films *Beautiful Lurette* (1960), *Midnight Revue* (1962), and *Beloved White Mouse* (1964). *Signals* and *In the Dust of the Stars* were Kolditz's two sci fi films. Both are ambitious and unique, with *In the Dust of the Stars* quite clearly incorporating elements of the musical and the western. The film stars an interesting international cast: Jana Brejchová, who plays Akala, the ship's commander, is a Czech actress who played Princess Bianca in Karel Zeman's *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* (1961), Leon Niemczyk, as the analyst Thob, was a Polish actor and international star known for his roles in *Night Train* (1959) and *Knife in the Water* (1962), and Ekkehard Schall, as the erratic Chief, was famous for his performances of Brechtian theater in the Berliner Ensemble.

Filmed in house at DEFA and Buftea studios, its most memorable shots are on location in Romania. The spacecraft may appear to be a Tardis—bigger on the inside than the outside—but the sets are surprisingly effective. The Berca Mud Volcanoes provided exteriors for the spaceship landing and an old salt mine (perhaps Salina Turda or Salina Slănic Prahova—both now tourist attractions!) was the locale for the Turi's underground mining. The barren desert setting is an essential aspect of the film—it heightens the sense of the devastation that has been wrought on Turian society by the Temians, emphasizes the isolated nature of the civilization (and planet), and aligns the film with westerns and post-apocalyptic settings. *In the Dust of the Stars* was not alone in such choices at the time, and a significant number of contemporaneous sci fi films built up a sense of dystopia with similar settings. Their bubbles of civilization surrounded by desolation conveyed important aspects of the anti-colonial activism

and social unrest prevalent during the post-1968 period. *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Z.P.G.* (1972), *Soylent Green* (1973), *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976), *Zardoz* (1974), *Logan's Run* (1976), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Alien* (1979), and *Mad Max* (1979), for example, all play with obvious or hidden dystopias, desolate landscapes, and an urgent need to know more—to uncover or remember a critical message hidden in plain sight.

In the case of *In the Dust of the Stars*, the message received by planet Cynro from TEM 4 seems perfectly clear: a request for help. But upon arrival they are met with a series of baffling denials, mixed messages, mind control, and their own seeming inability to recognize social inequality. The first person they meet, Chta, dresses like a hippy mashup of Celtic and Native American design. She is kind and welcoming, but fades into the background when they arrive in the Temian city. We soon see she is a servant at best, and probably worse, as she is slapped repeatedly by the Temians despite her subservience. The men the crew encounters in the huge reception hall dress alike and act in concert with each other—their only signs of distinction are the 1970s hair and beard combos they sport. They all wear the same logo—a phallic symbol that emphasizes the quasi-fascist nature of Temian society. Throughout the film the men are grouped in similar ways, acting uniformly in obedience to Ronk and the Chief as part of a militaristic hierarchy—even their party clothing is homogenous. There seems to be little individual thought on TEM 4, which further confirms it as a totalitarian society. One of the more humorous aspects of the film is how this rigidity is "disguised" by the faux casual manner in which everyone is forced to awkwardly half-recline on lounges. Whether the actors found it genuinely challenging in unclear, but it perfectly depicts how the Chief and Ronk are acting cool in a way that is pure performance.

The Cynro crew also dress uniformly, though their clothes share more in common with ABBA than the military. In fact, the film is chock full of fashion, which is part of the fun. Whether it's powder blue jumpsuits and white leather ankle boots, groovy yellow space suits with orange helmets, or wine-colored leather party jumpsuits—they are ready to rock. It's all very 1970s Berlin, and this film is right up there with the best of glam fashion sci fi—*Barbarella* (1968) and *Flash Gordon* (1980)

included. There is an overall go-go vibe to the costuming which aligns the military men with western club scenes as much as it does with fascism. Despite their severity and uniformity, with their tall black boots, short skirts, and clothing made of satin, mesh, and vinyl, their look leans heavily towards leather fetish bar. This kind of western decadence is further demonstrated in the women's outfits. Temian women appear in the film only as dancers wearing bikinis draped in chiffon. They are decorative and subservient—so much so that the Chief can control them by means of a musical instrument. Their partial undress has clear intent in the film, but less obvious is the purpose of a nude shower and dance scene performed by the ship psychologist Miu (Regine Heintze). Most likely an example of *freikörperkultur* (free body culture), however, her enthusiastic bathing and artful free-style dancing are examples of German naturism and a tribute to healthy body culture in contrast to the Chief's despotic manipulation of women's bodies. Her modern dance silhouetted against a panel of muted geometrical lights is also analogous to Britt Ekland's vigorous interpretive dance in *The Wicker Man* (1973)—another example of wholesome, natural 1970s sexuality!

That the Chief controls others with music is one of the more intriguing features of the movie. Kolditz had already worked on musicals, and had collaborated previously with well-known film composer Karl-Ernst Sasse. Sasse's soundtrack integrates music into the narrative and gives it transformative power, much in the same way as the film's quasi-recreational drugs function. The blue and red bottles that characters constantly spray into their mouths suggest stimulants and/or downers, and music is also used to enhance mood and actions. The Chief tells Akala that distractions help him concentrate and orders his dance troupe to perform as they discuss politics. But it is more than just a distraction—the Chief uses music to manipulate others. He brainwashes the crew to forget about the call for help, which they experience as inebriation, happily swaying with the music as a beam of light plays on their forehead. He does so again when he plays upon a kind of instrument (part synth keyboard and part holiday lights display), forcing women to manically gyrate in response to his whims. This process combines dance with thought control and brings to mind the equally fascinating film *The Apple* (1980). Shot on the other side of the wall in West Berlin, it is an antifascist parable whose focus is

the music industry. Both films suggest that music can be used to control as well as enlighten.

The film features many such dichotomies, and for music, the illuminating alternate is the theme song from the opening credits which is repeated at the film's end. Part 1 "Das Licht" (Light) and Part 2 "Der Mensch" (Humans) are sung by Ruth Hohmann (a jazz singer) and Erbe-Chor (a choral group), with lyrics by Kolditz. With its meditative and ethereal sound and close harmonies, this gorgeous song recalls Delibe's "Flower Duet" from the opera *Lakmé*, and introduces female voices into the film's beginning and end. This offsets the inherent violence of the story and offers another contrast—between men and women and how they handle power, responsibility, and confrontation. The Chief and Ronk believe in the use and abuse of individual power, and their subjects act and think as one—in other words, a fascist structure. The women in their society are also quite literally objects to control and the enslaved population is separated by gender as well, with the women acting as servants and the men incessantly toiling underground in the mines. The Cynro crew, on the other hand, is helmed by a woman, Akala, with three other women in powerful positions—Miu, the psychologist, Illik (Silvia Popovici), the doctor, and Rall (Violeta Andrei), the healer. The two men—Suko (Alfred Struwe) the navigator, and Thob the analyst—often defer to them and they all function as an equal team. Akala and Suko, in particular, offer an interesting dialectic as they create a necessary balance together—she is open and trustful and he is cautious and skeptical. They also form the only romantic love interest in the film, though this is barely touched upon. Romance is not central to this story—rather the cooperative coexistence of human beings is key.

The main contrast between genders occurs in the meetings between Akala and the Chief, however. They meet twice—first in his surreal lair of mirrors and later in his sculpture garden. Both locations are heavily artificial, as is he. In his lair he appears with blue hair in a sparkly blue tunic—which resembles Captain Kirk's casual wraparound outfit from *Star Trek's* "The Trouble with Tribbles" (1967). In the garden he is decked out in a voluminous white cape lined in bright orange with hair so slick with orange hairspray it looks like blood. And with all due respect to Dr. Frank-N-Furter's first appearance in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), the Chief's cape makes a more impressive and decadent entrance. It signifies the same grandiosity and self-regard as in the earlier film, but when the

Chief whips it off and gracelessly sits on it, his bravado plummets from the sublime to the ridiculous. The mise-en-scène does all the work in these moments—confirming him as a poseur less concerned with ruling than with enjoying himself and somehow coasting on the power he has been handed in this world. Alternately, Akala is dressed in natural colors and barely reacts to his shenanigans before reasserting her interest in respecting all humans and brokering peace. She enacts a kind of passive resistance to his grandstanding, and remains undistracted by his zany antics and the slithering of pythons—not to mention the bizarre presence of the framed and living heads of old men (perhaps patriarchs?) peering at them from the wall.

The Chief has a silver brooch shaped like a python as well—and while the pervasive presence of snakes feels vaguely Biblical, it also suggests his sneaky ways, predatory nature, and, well—chic status. The nebulous Biblical angle emerges in the scenes with the Turi as well. Perhaps it is the considerable number of extras toiling away in the desert and underground, but these scenes recall *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Spartacus* (1960) in epic scope and the sheer number of raggedly dressed people oppressed by capricious despots. They blend in with the salt mine and dirt and this is the way that the Chief and Ronk think of them—as expendable inhuman objects. As in those earlier films, *In the Dust of the Stars* speaks to topical political issues while acknowledging the eternal nature of power and oppression. The film at its core is not just about seeing oppression but about the problem of opposing it. When the Turi ask for weapons, Suko and Akala tell them that violence will call forth more and greater violence while disagreeing on how to proceed. In an intimate scene, Akala retreats to her own space to ponder their options and talks to Illik about what to do. At first, she seems to be sitting in a prison cell with bars, lamenting Suko's criticisms and her own confusion—an apt image. But when Illik chides her, reminding her that Suko loves her, she swiftly pushes a button and up snap what are now clearly Venetian blinds, revealing she is sitting in an alcove. This trompe l'oeil pinpoints the change in perception necessary to face the question of resistance.

At first proposing that they stay on the planet, Akala pivots to a dialogue with the Chief. She tries revealing his hypocrisy but fails—the Chief believes in his superiority and merely declares that the Turi have no culture (voicing the opinion of many colonialists and dictators). The crew also attempt to respond to coercion and arbitrary torture with generosity and logic. But while Ronk thanks them for it, he repays it with more and deeper violence, shooting Suko out of spite. Their Cynro ideals require acknowledgement, but they get none. Ronk continues to wreak havoc with an elaborate plan to flood the ship and possibly drown many of the Turi, while the Chief perversely plays games with his glass balls (another phallic reference). As Ronk's diabolical plan comes to fruition, Akala finds she must stay on the planet anyway: she has become a pawn in their game, and can no longer call the shots. Suko becomes a martyr for the cause, leaving her doubly bereft and alone. His sacrifice is one of many that will be made, willingly or not, and is foreshadowed in the film when he is framed in the salt mine, looking up at the staircase he has just descended: he seems tiny and vulnerable there, a mere speck of humanity that cannot hope to defy the massive forces around him.

As grim (and realistic) as this is, however, the film does not end without hope. It offers a complex and disheartening answer to the question of how to oppose tyrants, but one that is left open-ended. As Akala tells the Chief: "Your great era is coming to an end. This planet's secret has been revealed. It's the first step." This warning could be made to the Soviets or colonialist west—it is equally aimed at all unjust systems. Uniquely it comes from the female characters—Akala and Chta hug amidst their sorrow at the end of the film, portending an unknown future. The Chief also seems to be aware of the new uncertainty—knowing that Ronk has crossed a line by murdering one of the Cynro crew he roars: "We will never be able to subdue them again!" Thus, the message has not only been received, but also understood by the end of the film. In this respect *In the Dust of the Stars* embraces a central theme of sci fi in its critique of human inequity as read through the lens of interplanetary counterparts.

It does so in a way that overturns social perceptions inherent in the recent past. George Pal's *The Time Machine* (1960)—adapted from H.G. Wells' novel—divided a future world into surface dwellers (the Eloi) and those

confined to the depths (the Morlocks) but his sympathies lay with the naïve and passive Eloi. A product of its time in terms of anti-colonial discourse, *In the Dust of the Stars* reverses this dichotomy and rereads the surface dwellers as those living off the toil of the enslaved workers below. On the other hand, it is perhaps contrary to the moment when it comes to technology. Unlike Hal in *2001*, the ship's computer is not personified in its voice—or in its shape, as in *Star Wars*. Rather, it is fully analog in concept and remains firmly robotic and non-human. It plays an important role, as it records and interprets transmissions, but while it is essential to the unraveling of Ronk's mind control, it never functions independently of the crew's wishes or programming. It merely processes data in a rather humdrum fashion: no fetishizing of technology here. In this sense, the computer is not artificial intelligence nor is that seen as a goal. The intelligence on board is human. It's an interesting choice given the time. The theme song at the end of the film further emphasizes this investment in human beings (*mensch*)—choosing to concentrate on taking care of the entirety of what already exists rather than stargazing.

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Interview with Stefan Kolditz

Our enormous thanks to screenwriter Stefan Kolditz, director Gottfried Kolditz's son, for sharing these memories about his father's life and filmmaking career with Dennis Bartok from Deaf Crocodile:

Your father was born in 1922 in Altenbach. Did your father ever talk about what his childhood was like? What did his parents do?

My father was born in Altenbach (Germany). A village (today around 1,000 inhabitants) less than 14 miles south from Leipzig (Saxonia). His grandfather owned a pub (Gasthaus), and his father was a bailiff, his mother a seamstress. He was the only child.

They moved to Leipzig when he was a kid. His father was a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) -- he didn't join the fascist NSDAP (Nazi Party) after Hitler came to power. So, he kept working as a bailiff. After Hitler and Nazi Gemany were defeated he had a small career, because he wasn't a Nazi. In Altenbach there was a street named after my father in December 2018.

Were he and his parents deeply affected by the aftermath of the First World War, and do you think that shaped his artistic worldview in any way, growing up during those years?

I can't remember that WW I was ever mentioned. My father told me a lot about his time as a German soldier in WW II.

Did your father ever talk about how his love for movies developed growing up, and what were some of his favorite films as a child – or as an adult?

No. I think there was no cinema in Altenbach. Of course there was in Leipzig, but he never mentioned any affections for movies as a boy. What he mentioned was his love for sports (field hockey, climbing in the beautiful and bizarre Elbsandsteingebirge (Elbe Sandstone Mountains) near Dresden). He was very intelligent, well educated, sportive (he was 1.96 meters/6 feet 5 inches high, which was really big at this time), but I have never understood why a boy from a not intellectual or bourgeois background wanted to become an artist. Although there are poems he wrote from the late 1930s.

His favorite films had been CITY LIGHTS by Chaplin and CHILDREN OF PARADISE by Marcel Carne. I think he loved Billy Wilder and admired Ingmar Bergman.

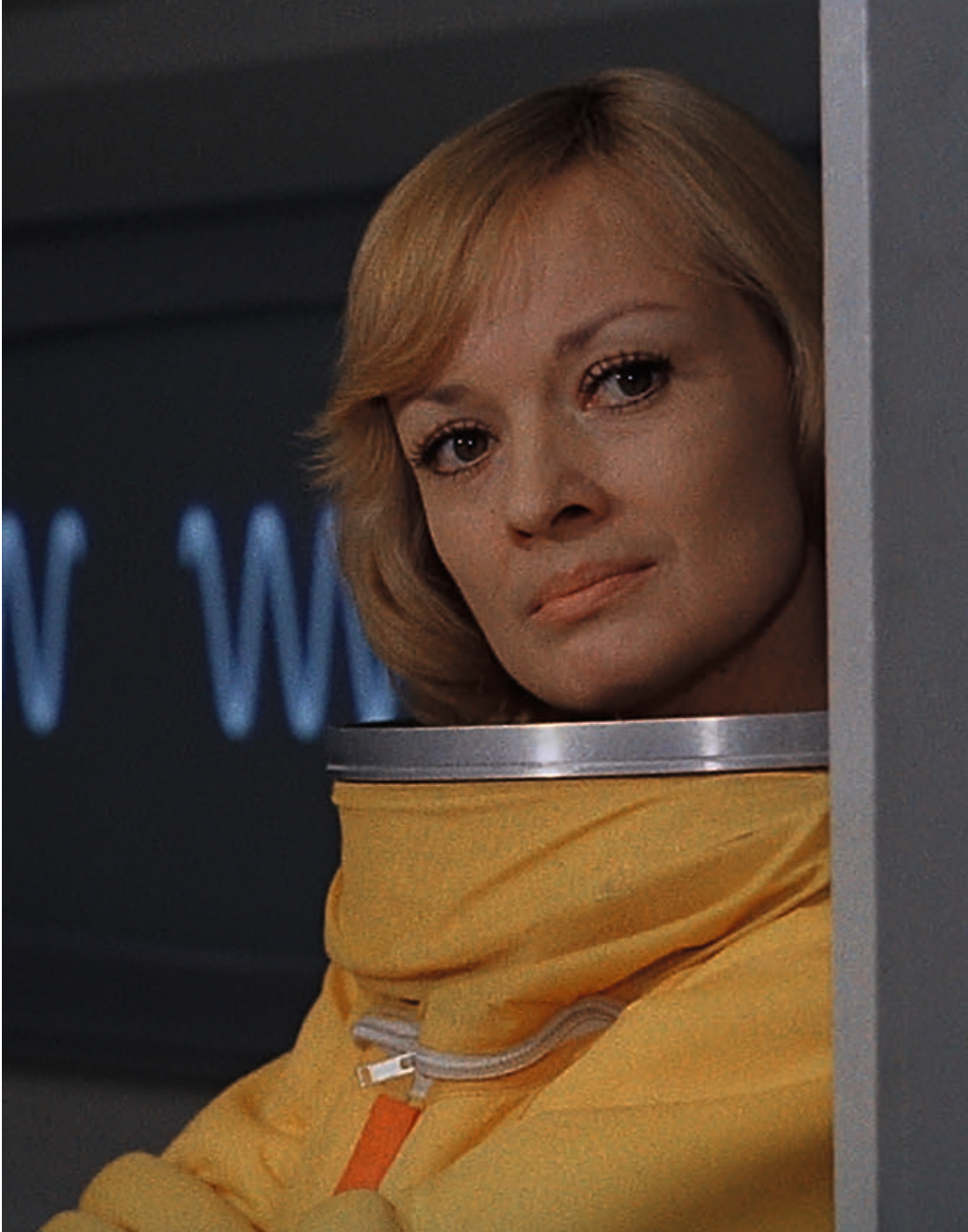
Your father served in World War II and was seriously wounded, I believe. Did he ever talk about his wartime experiences and how they may have influenced him as a filmmaker?

Yes, he did, when I was old enough to understand (between 11 and 14). After school he was drafted into the Wehrmacht like every boy in Nazi Germany. In 1942 (he was 18) he served some months in France. Then in 1943 he was transferred to the Eastern front in Russia. He fought in the artillery. Heavily wounded, he was sent in April, 1945 back into a hospital in Germany. His stories about the war and his experience hadn't been stories about heroic acts (like many other soldiers like to tell), but about an enormously smart young soldier who pretended to be incompetent on purpose so he wouldn't be promoted to an officer. Later when I became a young man, I would have had so many deeper questions (especially when I wrote the WWII miniseries "GENERATION WAR" in 2013) but he died at the age of 59. Literally out of the blue. I was 25 and it was a deep shock for me. His early death destroyed every chance of asking him again.

In the late 1940s your father began studying theatre at the Leipzig State University. Do you think theatre or film was his first great love? How did he begin work at DEFA, the East German state owned film studio?

My father began studying in April, 1945 (while 120 miles from Leipzig in Berlin, fanatic soldiers still trying to defend Hitler and the German capital). He was studying German Studies at the University in Leipzig. One year later he added studying acting and directing at the University of Music. He wrote a dissertation about a linguistic theme. He was a member of a theatrical group and had a first engagement in 1949 at the Theatre Leipzig. Parallel to this, he tried to contact the DEFA Film Studios in Potsdam and a production company in Munich to become a movie director. Both were denied. So he started his career as a theatre director in Leipzig, Dresden, Rostock. His last position was in Karl-Marx-Stadt (former and now again Chemnitz) as an *Oberspielleiter* (in charge of the whole program and at the same time working as a director). We are talking about only 10 years time. Till today it's unbelievable for me to see his enormous energy in such a small amount of time. After WWII there were two categories of former soldiers in Germany: the soldiers who had been destroyed (depressive, self-pitying, emotionally incapable of relating to their wives or children). And soldiers who blessed their destiny of having survived a brutal and mendacious war and wanted to use this luck to make something out of their lives. My father belongs to the second group. But don't ask me why a boy from a little village wanted to become a director. Especially a movie director for the big screen.

He got his chance to work for the DEFA Film Studios in October,1955 when they were searching for a musical adviser for the filmopera ZAR UND ZIMMERMANN (directed by Hans Mueller). In the 1950s in East and West German musicals had been a very popular film genre (people wanted to "forget" the 12 years of Hitler and their own guilt and responsibility). It was his start as a film director (learning by doing).



Your father began directing films in the mid-1950s and worked in a number of different genres including comedies, westerns and science-fiction films like the two movies, SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE and IN THE DUST OF THE STARS we're releasing on Blu-ray. Do you think he had a favorite genre as a filmmaker and if so, which genre?

Even today I admire that he had worked in so many genres. He was not one of the many directors who were working in a very narrow range of genres. I think in his time there had been only a few directors (if at all) at the DEFA who would have been capable to do the movies he shot. On the other hand: in the DEFA, genre movies were classified as pure "entertainment", meaning not high class art. High class means important. And important were movies about the working class on their way to communism. But the audience was yearning for entertaining movies which the critics often didn't respect. Many of his movies were -- today you would say -- blockbusters, and a couple of them are shown every year again and again on German television.

Do you have any personal memories of visiting the DEFA studios while your father was working there?

Believe it or not: in my whole life as a son of Gottfried Kolditz, I joined the set in only one of his movies. In 1970. I was 14. With my whole class. It was SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE.

The first of the two films we're releasing, SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE in 1970, was a very ambitious production in 70mm and one of the most expensive movies DEFA had made up to that point. Do you remember any of the specific production challenges your father faced directing the film? There are of course similarities to one of the most famous 70mm science-fiction films of the time, Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. Did your father see Kubrick's film before making SIGNALS, and how do you think it influenced him?

My father analyzed some international science fiction movies. Of course Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY was in the center. He gave the team a written analysis. The shooting had to be delayed for month because he became very ill (almost dying). The alternative standby director "shit stones" as they say, and prayed that my father would survive. He wrote later: "I wouldn't have known how to shoot it." It was a co-production with a Polish studio. It was not pleasant and extremely hard because they didn't fulfull their obligations. My father and his cameraman Otto Hanisch had to improvise every day. Both knew that the script was not perfect. So they tried to compensate for this with the special effects. And at least they had been state of the art. To remember the difference in budget: 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY $10,000,000 U.S.; SIGNALS 5,000,000 East German marks. SIGNALS won a prize in Paris for the best special effects (my father wasn't allowed to take the prize, it was accepted by the director of the DEFA studio).

The cast of SIGNALS is very diverse. Actors from different countries. There was a utopian ideal in East Germany that, if there is communism in the whole world, it would be a world without war, exploitation and poverty. The world is united in peace, equality and respect. What a wonderful and naïve idea. Especially when we look at the present all over the world.

In 1976, your father directed the second of his science-fiction films, IN THE DUST OF THE STARS. In many ways it's a much wilder and more surreal film than SIGNALS, including Mod fashions and music, brief moments of nudity and a lead villain played by Ekkehard Schall who's dressed like a glam rock star. Had things begun to change politically and culturally in East Germany by 1976 that allowed your father more artistic freedom in this second sci-fi film?

In the 1970s in East Germany the atmosphere was a little bit more relaxed. Western culture, especially American and British pop culture, was enormously popular amongst young people. Speaking about me, I was listening only to AFN (American Forces Radio) and the BBC.

Did he ever share any personal thoughts or memories of the two films with you, and did he prefer one over the other?

No. The only thing I know is that IN THE DUST OF THE STARS had a bigger audience than SIGNALS.

Your father worked at DEFA for most of his career – did he ever talk about what it was like working for a state-run film studio? Your father was one of the more successful and prolific directors at DEFA, but did he also face issues with censorship at the time? Were there film projects he wanted to make but couldn't get support for from the studio?

Yes, we talked very often about this. He was one of the few directors who were not members of the communist state party (the SED, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany). That means that he was not a brave socialist. This and the fact that he didn't shoot "important", significant movies was a situation he was aware of. Some months before his unpredictable death I asked him: Why don't you shoot movies about the life in East Germany?" His answer was: "Because I can't tell the truth. And I don't want to lie."

Your father's last film THE THING IN THE CASTLE in 1979 was a kind of fountain-of-youth story about a rejuvenation machine. Do you have any memories of him working on this project?

Unfortunately not.

Can you talk a little bit about your parents: how did your father and mother meet, and was your mother involved in his filmmaking career in any way?

They met at the theatre of Karl-Marx-Stadt. My mother, 4 years younger, born in Leipzig in a family of hairdressers, was a costume designer. They worked together in many plays. But when I was born (1956) and my sister Susanne 4 years later, my mother became a housewife. I think it was not an easy decision for her.

Was their home filled with conversations about making movies and visits from actors and crew people, or did he tend to leave his work at the studio?

My father had many contacts with colleagues, but mostly on a professional basis. He was a family man. Theirs was a circle of befriended couples, none of them from the movie industry. The only actor who visited him very often was Gojko Mitic. The biggest star of the DEFA. Especially when they worked together on APACHEN and ULZANA [and SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE.]

Do you have any personal favorites from your father's filmography and if so, which films?

As I said I admire his curiosity and enthusiasm to work in almost every genre. When he died, he was preparing two movies. A western in Mongolia (THE SCOUT) and CINAMONPIRATES (as a feature film and a TV series, a co-production with a West German production company). Both projects had been written by him.

The first film of his that I saw was SNOW WHITE (1961). It was the premiere, and after the end of the movie the actors came onto the stage and I thought they had left the movie. I was 5 years old. Some of his films are still fresh: DER JUNGE ENGLÄNDER (1958) was shot in the style of German Expressionism. BELOVED WHITE MOUSE (1962) had a playful atmosphere and was extremely successful. SPUR DES FALKEN (TRAIL OF THE FALCON, 1968) was a boost -- even today young directors told me how much they were impressed seeing it as young boys. APACHEN (1973) and ULZANA (1974) had a very high standard. REVUE UM MITTERNACHT (1962) is a really fresh and satirical musical.

Did you follow your father into a career in film or theatre in any way? Although it's many years after the movies were made and many of his father's colleagues have passed away, are you still in contact with any of his co-workers from the days of SIGNALS and/or IN THE DUST OF THE STARS?

I've been working as a scriptwriter for more than 30 years. I was very often in contact with one of his favorite cameramen, Otto Hanisch [who was D.P. on SIGNALS: A SPACE ADVENTURE]. And he told me many stories about their collaboration. He admired my father very much. He died two years ago.

Many thanks for sharing your memories and observations on your father's filmmaking career!

You're welcome. It was a pleasure.

-Stefan Kolditz, 11.11.2024

Notes on the Restoration

Signals: A Space Adventure

In 1969/70, *Signals: A Space Adventure* was made with a budget of 5 million East German marks. The DEFA Studios headed the co-production with Przedsiebiorstwo Realizacji Filmów Warsaw.

The utopian adventure film was shot on 70mm Orwo color film. It premiered in East Berlin's Kosmos Cinema on December 17, 1970.

Signals: A Space Adventure was scanned in 6k resolution from the 70mm original negative and restored in 4k. A 6-magnetic-channel recording was used as the source material for sound remastering. Pharos - The Post Group, Munich carried out the digital restoration in 2022.

In the Dust of the Stars

In the Dust of the Stars was scanned in 2K resolution from the 35mm original negatives and restored in 2K. An original 17.5mm magnetic sound recording was used for the audio restoration. The film was digitized and restored by PostFactory GmbH in 2013.

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